ÉMILE ZOLA

ABBE MOURET'S TRANSGRESSION

Эмиль Золя

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Золя Э.

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

'LA FAUTE DE L'ABBE MOURET' was, with respect to the date of publication, the fourth volume of M. Zola's 'Rougon-Macquart' series; but in the amended and final scheme of that great literary undertaking, it occupies the ninth place. It proceeds from the sixth volume of the series, 'The Conquest of Plassans;' which is followed by the two works that deal with the career of Octave Mouret, Abbe Serge Mouret's elder brother. In 'The Conquest of Plassans,' Serge and his half-witted sister, Desiree, are seen in childhood at their home in Plassans, which is wrecked by the doings of a certain Abbe Faujas and his relatives. Serge Mouret grows up, is called by an instinctive vocation to the priesthood, and becomes parish priest of Les Artaud, a well-nigh pagan hamlet in one of those bare, burning stretches of country with which Provence abounds. And here it is that 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret' opens in the old ruinous church, perched upon a hillock in full view of the squalid village, the arid fields, and the great belts of rock which shut in the landscape all around.

There are two elements in this remarkable story, which, from the standpoint of literary style, has never been excelled by anything that M. Zola has since written; and one may glance at it therefore from two points of view. Taking it under its sociological and religious aspect, it will be found to be an indirect indictment of the celibacy of the priesthood; that celibacy, contrary to Nature's fundamental law, which assuredly has largely influenced the destinies of the Roman Catholic Church. To that celibacy, and to all the evils that have sprang from it, may be ascribed much of the irreligion current in France to-day. The periodical reports on criminality issued by the French Ministers of Justice since the foundation of the Republic in 1871, supply materials for a most formidable indictment of that vow of perpetual chastity which Rome exacts from her clergy. Nowadays it is undoubtedly too late for Rome to go back upon that vow and thereby transform the whole of her sacerdotal organisation; but, perhaps, had she done so in past times, before the spirit of inquiry and free examination came into being, she might have assured herself many more centuries of supremacy than have fallen to her lot. But she has ever sought to dissociate the law of the Divinity from the law of Nature, as though indeed the latter were but the invention of the Fiend.

Abbe Mouret, M. Zola's hero, finds himself placed between the law of the Divinity and the law of Nature: and the struggle waged within him by those two forces is a terrible one. That which training has implanted in his mind proves the stronger, and, so far as the canons of the Church can warrant it, he saves his soul. But the problem is not quite frankly put by M. Zola; for if Abbe Mouret transgresses he does so unwittingly, at a time when he is unconscious of his priesthood and has no memory of any vow. When the truth flashes upon him he is horrified with himself, and forthwith returns to the Church. A further struggle between the contending forces then certainly ensues, and ends in the final victory of the Church. But it must at least be said that in the lapses which occur in real life among the Roman priesthood, the circumstances are altogether different from those which M. Zola has selected for his story.

The truth is that in 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret,' betwixt lifelike glimpses of French rural life, the author transports us to a realm of poesy and imagination. This is, indeed, so true that he has introduced into his work all the ideas on which he had based an early unfinished poem called 'Genesis.' He carries us to an enchanted garden, the Paradou – a name which one need hardly say is Provencal for Paradise[1] – and there Serge Mouret, on recovering from brain fever, becomes, as it were, a new

[1] There is a village called Paradou in Provence, between Les Baux and Arles.

Adam by the side of a new Eve, the fair and winsome Albine. All this part of the book, then, is poetry in prose. The author has remembered the ties which link Rousseau to the realistic school of fiction, and, as in the pages of Jean-Jacques, trees, springs, mountains, rocks, and flowers become animated beings and claim their place in the world's mechanism. One may indeed go back far beyond Rousseau, even to Lucretius himself; for more than once we are irresistibly reminded of Lucretian scenes, above which through M. Zola's pages there seems to hover the pronouncement of Sophocles:

> No ordinance of man shall override
> The settled laws of Nature and of God;
> Not written these in pages of a book,
> Nor were they framed to-day, nor yesterday;
> We know not whence they are; but this we know,
> That they from all eternity have been,
> And shall to all eternity endure.

And if we pass to the young pair whose duo of love is sung amidst the varied voices of creation, we are irresistibly reminded of the Paul and Virginia of St. Pierre, and the Daphnis and Chloe of Longus. Beside them, in their marvellous garden, lingers a memory too of Manon and Des Grieux, with a suggestion of Lauzun and a glimpse of the art of Fragonard. All combine, all contribute – from the great classics to the eighteenth century *petits maitres*– to build up a story of love's rise in the human breast in answer to Nature's promptings.

M. Zola wrote 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret' one summer under the trees of his garden, mindful the while of gardens that he had known in childhood: the flowery expanse which had stretched before his grandmother's home at Pont-au-Beraud and the wild estate of Galice, between Roquefavour and Aix-en-Provence, through which he had roamed as a lad with friends then boys like himself: Professor Baille and Cezanne, the painter. And into his description of the wondrous Paradou he has put all his remembrance of the gardens and woods of Provence, where many a plant and flower thrive with a luxuriance unknown to England. True, in order to refresh his memory and avoid mistakes, he consulted various horticultural manuals whilst he was writing; of which circumstance captious critics have readily laid hold, to proclaim that the description of the Paradou is a mere florist's catalogue.

But it is nothing of the kind. The florist who might dare to offer such a catalogue to the public would be speedily assailed by all the horticultural journalists of England and all the customers of villadom. For M. Zola avails himself of a poet's license to crowd marvel upon marvel, to exaggerate nature's forces, to transform the tiniest blooms into giant examples of efflorescence, and to mingle even the seasons one with the other. But all this was premeditated; there was a picture before his mind's eye, and that picture he sought to trace with his pen, regardless of all possible objections. It is the poet's privilege to do this and even to be admired for it. It would be easy for some leaned botanist, some expert zoologist, to demolish Milton from the standpoint of their respective sciences, but it would be absurd to do so. We ask of the poet the flowers of his imagination, and the further he carries us from the sordid realities, the limited possibilities of life, the more are we grateful to him.

And M. Zola's Paradou is a flight of fancy, even as its mistress, the fair, loving, guileless Albine, whose smiles and whose tears alike go to our hearts, is the daughter of imagination. She is a flower – the very flower of life's youth – in the midst of all the blossoms of her garden. She unfolds to life and to love even as they unfold; she loves rapturously even as they do under the sun and the azure; and she dies with them when the sun's caress is gone and the chill of winter has fallen. At the thought of her, one instinctively remembers Malherbe's 'Ode A Du Perrier:'

> She to this earth belonged, where beauty fast
> To direst fate is borne:

A rose, she lasted, as the roses last,
Only for one brief morn.

French painters have made subjects of many episodes in M. Zola's works, but none has been more popular with them than Albine's pathetic, perfumed death amidst the flowers. I know several paintings of great merit which that touching incident has inspired.

Albine, if more or less unreal, a phantasm, the spirit as it were of Nature incarnate in womanhood, is none the less the most delightful of M. Zola's heroines. She smiles at us like the vision of perfect beauty and perfect love which rises before us when our hearts are yet young and full of illusions. She is the ideal, the very quintessence of woman.

In Serge Mouret, her lover, we find a man who, in more than one respect, recalls M. Zola's later hero, the Abbe Froment of 'Lourdes' and 'Rome.' He has the same loving, yearning nature; he is born – absolutely like Abbe Froment – of an unbelieving father and a mother of mystical mind. But unlike Froment he cannot shake off the shackles of his priesthood. Reborn to life after his dangerous illness, he relapses into the religion of death, the religion which regards life as impurity, which denies Nature's laws, and so often wrecks human existence, as if indeed that had been the Divine purpose in setting man upon earth. His struggles suggest various passages in 'Lourdes' and 'Rome.' In fact, in writing those works, M. Zola must have had his earlier creation in mind. There are passages in 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret' culled from the writings of the Spanish Jesuit Fathers and the 'Imitation' of Thomas a Kempis that recur almost word for word in the Trilogy of the Three Cities. Some might regard this as evidence of the limitation of M. Zola's powers, but I think differently. I consider that he has in both instances designedly taken the same type of priest in order to show how he may live under varied circumstances; for in the earlier instance he has led him to one goal, and in the later one to another. And the passages of prayer, entreaty, and spiritual conflict simply recur because they are germane, even necessary, to the subject in both cases.

Of the minor characters that figure in 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret' the chief thing to be said is that they are lifelike. If Serge is almost wholly spiritual, if Albine is the daughter of poesy, they, the others, are of the earth earthy. As a result of their appearance on the scene, there are some powerful contrasting passages in the book. Archangias, the coarse and brutal Christian Brother who serves as a foil to Abbe Mouret; La Teuse, the priest's garrulous old housekeeper; Desiree, his 'innocent' sister, a grown woman with the mind of a child and an almost crazy affection for every kind of bird and beast, are all admirably portrayed. Old Bambousse, though one sees but little of him, stands out as a genuine type of the hard-headed French peasant, who invariably places pecuniary considerations before all others. And Fortune and Rosalie, Vincent and Catherine, and their companions, are equally true to nature. It need hardly be said that there is many a village in France similar to Les Artaud. That hamlet's shameless, purely animal life has in no wise been over-pictured by M. Zola. Those who might doubt him need not go as far as Provence to find such communities. Many Norman hamlets are every whit as bad, and, in Normandy, conditions are aggravated by a marked predilection for the bottle, which, as French social-scientists have been pointing out for some years now, is fast hastening the degenerescence of the peasantry, both morally and physically.

With reference to the English version of 'La Faute de l'Abbe Mouret' herewith presented, I may just say that I have subjected it to considerable revision and have retranslated all the more important passages myself.

MERTON, SURREY. E. A. V.

BOOK I

I

As La Teuse entered the church she rested her broom and feather-brush against the altar. She was late, as she had that day began her half-yearly wash. Limping more than ever in her haste and hustling the benches, she went down the church to ring the *Angelus*. The bare, worn bell-rope dangled from the ceiling near the confessional, and ended in a big knot greasy from handling. Again and again, with regular jumps, she hung herself upon it; and then let her whole bulky figure go with it, whirling in her petticoats, her cap awry, and her blood rushing to her broad face.

Having set her cap straight with a little pat, she came back breathless to give a hasty sweep before the altar. Every day the dust persistently settled between the disjoined boards of the platform. Her broom rummaged among the corners with an angry rumble. Then she lifted the altar cover and was sorely vexed to find that the large upper cloth, already darned in a score of places, was again worn through in the very middle, so as to show the under cloth, which in its turn was so worn and so transparent that one could see the consecrated stone, embedded in the painted wood of the altar. La Teuse dusted the linen, yellow from long usage, and plied her feather-brush along the shelf against which she set the liturgical altar-cards. Then, climbing upon a chair, she removed the yellow cotton covers from the crucifix and two of the candlesticks. The brass of the latter was tarnished.

'Dear me!' she muttered, 'they really want a clean! I must give them a polish up!'

Then hopping on one leg, swaying and stumping heavily enough to drive in the flagstones, she hastened to the sacristy for the Missal, which she placed unopened on the lectern on the Epistle side, with its edges turned towards the middle of the altar. And afterwards she lighted the two candles. As she went off with her broom, she gave a glance round her to make sure that the abode of the Divinity had been put in proper order. All was still, save that the bell-rope near the confessional still swung between roof and floor with a sinuous sweep.

Abbe Mouret had just come down to the sacristy, a small and chilly apartment, which a passage separated from his dining-room.

'Good morning, Monsieur le Cure,' said La Teuse, laying her broom aside. 'Oh! you have been lazy this morning! Do you know it's a quarter past six?' And without allowing the smiling young priest sufficient time to reply, she added 'I've a scolding to give you. There's another hole in the cloth again. There's no sense in it. We have only one other, and I've been ruining my eyes over it these three days in trying to mend it. You will leave our poor Lord quite bare, if you go on like this.'

Abbe Mouret was still smiling. 'Jesus does not need so much linen, my good Teuse,' he cheerfully replied. 'He is always warm, always royally received by those who love Him well.'

Then stepping towards a small tap, he asked: 'Is my sister up yet? I have not seen her.'

'Oh, Mademoiselle Desiree has been down a long time,' answered the servant, who was kneeling before an old kitchen sideboard in which the sacred vestments were kept. 'She is already with her fowls and rabbits. She was expecting some chicks to be hatched yesterday, and it didn't come off. So you can guess her excitement.' Then the worthy woman broke off to inquire: 'The gold chasuble, eh?'

The priest, who had washed his hands and stood reverently murmuring a prayer, nodded affirmatively. The parish possessed only three chasubles: a violet one, a black one, and one in cloth-of-gold. The last had to be used on the days when white, red, or green was prescribed by the ritual, and it was therefore an all important garment. La Teuse lifted it reverently from the shelf covered with blue paper, on which she laid it after each service; and having placed it on the sideboard, she cautiously removed the fine cloths which protected its embroidery. A golden lamb slumbered on a golden cross, surrounded by broad rays of gold. The gold tissue, frayed at the folds, broke out in little

slender tufts; the embossed ornaments were getting tarnished and worn. There was perpetual anxiety, fluttering concern, at seeing it thus go off spangle by spangle. The priest had to wear it almost every day. And how on earth could it be replaced – how would they be able to buy the three chasubles whose place it took, when the last gold threads should be worn out?

Upon the chasuble La Teuse next laid out the stole, the maniple, the girdle, alb and amice. But her tongue still wagged while she crossed the stole with the maniple, and wreathed the girdle so as to trace the venerated initial of Mary's holy name.

'That girdle is not up to much now,' she muttered; 'you will have to make up your mind to get another, your reverence. It wouldn't be very hard; I could plait you one myself if I only had some hemp.'

Abbe Mouret made no answer. He was dressing the chalice at a small table. A large old silver-gilt chalice it was with a bronze base, which he had just taken from the bottom of a deal cupboard, in which the sacred vessels and linen, the Holy Oils, the Missals, candlesticks, and crosses were kept. Across the cup he laid a clean purificator, and on this set the silver-gilt paten, with the host in it, which he covered with a small lawn pall. As he was hiding the chalice by gathering together the folds in the veil of cloth of gold matching the chasuble, La Teuse exclaimed:

'Stop, there's no corporal in the burse. Last night I took all the dirty purificators, palls, and corporals to wash them – separately, of course – not with the house-wash. By-the-bye, your reverence, I didn't tell you: I have just started the house-wash. A fine fat one it will be! Better than the last.'

Then while the priest slipped a corporal into the burse and laid the latter on the veil, she went on quickly:

'By-the-bye, I forgot! that gadabout Vincent hasn't come. Do you wish me to serve your mass, your reverence?'

The young priest eyed her sternly.

'Well, it isn't a sin,' she continued, with her genial smile. 'I did serve a mass once, in Monsieur Caffin's time. I serve it better, too, than ragamuffins who laugh like heathens at seeing a fly buzzing about the church. True I may wear a cap, I may be sixty years old, and as round as a tub, but I have more respect for our Lord than those imps of boys whom I caught only the other day playing at leap-frog behind the altar.'

The priest was still looking at her and shaking his head.

'What a hole this village is!' she grumbled. 'Not a hundred and fifty people in it! There are days, like to-day, when you wouldn't find a living soul in Les Artaud. Even the babies in swaddling clothes are gone to the vineyards! And goodness knows what they do among such vines – vines that grow under the pebbles and look as dry as thistles! A perfect wilderness, three miles from any highway! Unless an angel comes down to serve your mass, your reverence, you've only got me to help you, on my honour! or one of Mademoiselle Desiree's rabbits, no offence to your reverence!'

Just at that moment, however, Vincent, the Brichets' younger son, gently opened the door of the sacristy. His shock of red hair and his little, glistening, grey eyes exasperated La Teuse.

'Oh! the wretch!' she cried. 'I'll bet he's just been up to some mischief! Come on, you scamp, since his reverence is afraid I might dirty our Lord!'

On seeing the lad, Abbe Mouret had taken up the amice. He kissed the cross embroidered in the centre of it, and for a second laid the cloth upon his head; then lowering it over the collar-band of his cassock, he crossed it and fastened the tapes, the right one over the left. He next donned the alb, the symbol of purity, beginning with the right sleeve. Vincent stooped and turned around him, adjusting the alb, in order that it should fall evenly all round him to a couple of inches from the ground. Then he presented the girdle to the priest, who fastened it tightly round his loins, as a reminder of the bonds wherewith the Saviour was bound in His Passion.

La Teuse remained standing there, feeling jealous and hurt and struggling to keep silence; but so great was the itching of her tongue, that she soon broke out once more: 'Brother Archangias has

been here. He won't have a single child at school to-day. He went off again like a whirlwind to pull the brats' ears in the vineyards. You had better see him. I believe he has got something to say to you.'

Abbe Mouret silenced her with a wave of the hand. Then he repeated the usual prayers while he took the maniple – which he kissed before slipping it over his left forearm, as a symbol of the practice of good works – and while crossing on his breast the stole, the symbol of his dignity and power. La Teuse had to help Vincent in the work of adjusting the chasuble, which she fastened together with slender tapes, so that it might not slip off behind.

'Holy Virgin! I had forgotten the cruets!' she stammered, rushing to the cupboard. 'Come, look sharp, lad!'

Thereupon Vincent filled the cruets, phials of coarse glass, while she hastened to take a clean finger-cloth from a drawer. Abbe Mouret, holding the chalice by its stem with his left hand, the fingers of his right resting meanwhile on the burse, then bowed profoundly, but without removing his biretta, to a black wooden crucifix, which hung over the side-board. The lad bowed too, and, bearing the cruets covered with the finger-cloth, led the way out of the sacristy, followed by the priest, who walked on with downcast eyes, absorbed in deep and prayerful meditation.

II

The empty church was quite white that May morning. The bell-rope near the confessional hung motionless once more. The little bracket light, with its stained glass shade, burned like a crimson splotch against the wall on the right of the tabernacle. Vincent, having set the cruets on the credence, came back and knelt just below the altar step on the left, while the priest, after rendering homage to the Holy Sacrament by a genuflexion, went up to the altar and there spread out the corporal, on the centre of which he placed the chalice. Then, having opened the Missal, he came down again. Another bend of the knee followed, and, after crossing himself and uttering aloud the formula, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,' he raised his joined hands to his breast, and entered on the great divine drama, with his countenance blanched by faith and love.

'*Introibo ad altare Dei*.'

'*Ad Deum qui loetificat juventutem meam*,' gabbled Vincent, who, squatting on his heels, mumbled the responses of the antiphon and the psalm, while watching La Teuse as she roved about the church.

The old servant was gazing at one of the candles with a troubled look. Her anxiety seemed to increase while the priest, bowing down with hands joined again, recited the *Confiteor*. She stood still, in her turn struck her breast, her head bowed, but still keeping a watchful eye on the taper. For another minute the priest's grave voice and the server's stammers alternated:

'*Dominus vobiscum*.'

'*Et cum spiritu tuo*.'

Then the priest, spreading out his hands and afterwards again joining them, said with devout compunction: '*Oremus*' (Let us pray).

La Teuse could now stand it no longer, but stepped behind the altar, reached the guttering candle, and trimmed it with the points of her scissors. Two large blobs of wax had already been wasted. When she came back again putting the benches straight on her way, and making sure that there was holy-water in the fonts, the priest, whose hands were resting on the edge of the altar-cloth, was praying in subdued tones. And at last he kissed the altar.

Behind him, the little church still looked wan in the pale light of early morn. The sun, as yet, was only level with the tiled roof. The *Kyrie Eleisons* rang quiveringly through that sort of whitewashed stable with flat ceiling and bedaubed beams. On either side three lofty windows of plain glass, most of them cracked or smashed, let in a raw light of chalky crudeness.

The free air poured in as it listed, emphasising the naked poverty of the God of that forlorn village. At the far end of the church, above the big door which was never opened and the threshold of which was green with weeds, a boarded gallery – reached by a common miller's ladder – stretched from wall to wall. Dire were its creakings on festival days beneath the weight of wooden shoes. Near the ladder stood the confessional, with warped panels, painted a lemon yellow. Facing it, beside the little door, stood the font – a former holy-water stoup resting on a stonework pedestal. To the right and to the left, halfway down the church, two narrow altars stood against the wall, surrounded by wooden balustrades. On the left-hand one, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, was a large gilded plaster statue of the Mother of God, wearing a regal gold crown upon her chestnut hair; while on her left arm sat the Divine Child, nude and smiling, whose little hand raised the star-spangled orb of the universe. The Virgin's feet were poised on clouds, and beneath them peeped the heads of winged cherubs. Then the right-hand altar, used for the masses for the dead, was surmounted by a crucifix of painted papier-mache – a pendant, as it were, to the Virgin's effigy. The figure of Christ, as large as a child of ten years old, showed Him in all the horror of His death-throes, with head thrown back, ribs projecting, abdomen hollowed in, and limbs distorted and splashed with blood. There was a pulpit, too – a square box reached by a five-step block – near a clock with running weights, in a walnut

case, whose thuds shook the whole church like the beatings of some huge heart concealed, it might be, under the stone flags. All along the nave the fourteen Stations of the Cross, fourteen coarsely coloured prints in narrow black frames, bespeckled the staring whiteness of the walls with the yellow, blue, and scarlet of scenes from the Passion.

'*Deo Gratias*,' stuttered out Vincent at the end of the Epistle.

The mystery of love, the immolation of the Holy Victim, was about to begin. The server took the Missal and bore it to the left, or Gospel-side, of the altar, taking care not to touch the pages of the book. Each time he passed before the tabernacle he made a genuflexion slantwise, which threw him all askew. Returning to the right-hand side once more, he stood upright with crossed arms during the reading of the Gospel. The priest, after making the sign of the cross upon the Missal, next crossed himself: first upon his forehead – to declare that he would never blush for the divine word; then on his mouth – to show his unchanging readiness to confess his faith; and finally on his heart – to mark that it belonged to God alone.

'*Dominus vobiscum*,' said he, turning round and facing the cold white church.

'*Et cum spiritu tuo*,' answered Vincent, who once more was on his knees.

The Offertory having been recited, the priest uncovered the chalice. For a moment he held before his breast the paten containing the host, which he offered up to God, for himself, for those present, and for all the faithful, living and dead. Then, slipping it on to the edge of the corporal without touching it with his fingers, he took up the chalice and carefully wiped it with the purificator. Vincent had in the meanwhile fetched the cruets from the credence table, and now presented them in turn, first the wine and then the water. The priest then offered up on behalf of the whole world the half-filled chalice, which he next replaced upon the corporal and covered with the pall. Then once again he prayed, and returned to the side of the altar where the server let a little water dribble over his thumbs and forefingers to purify him from the slightest sinful stain. When he had dried his hands on the finger-cloth, La Teuse – who stood there waiting – emptied the cruet-salver into a zinc pail at the corner of the altar.

'*Orate, fratres*,' resumed the priest aloud as he faced the empty benches, extending and reclasping his hands in a gesture of appeal to all men of good-will. And turning again towards the altar, he continued his prayer in a lower tone, while Vincent began to mutter a long Latin sentence in which he eventually got lost. Now it was that the yellow sunbeams began to dart through the windows; called, as it were, by the priest, the sun itself had come to mass, throwing golden sheets of light upon the left-hand wall, the confessional, the Virgin's altar, and the big clock.

A gentle creak came from the confessional; the Mother of God, in a halo, in the dazzlement of her golden crown and mantle smiled tenderly with tinted lips upon the infant Jesus; and the heated clock throbbed out the time with quickening strokes. It seemed as if the sun peopled the benches with the dusty motes that danced in his beams, as if the little church, that whitened stable, were filled with a glowing throng. Without, were heard the sounds that told of the happy waking of the countryside, the blades of grass sighed out content, the damp leaves dried themselves in the warmth, the birds pruned their feathers and took a first flit round. And indeed the countryside itself seemed to enter with the sun; for beside one of the windows a large rowan tree shot up, thrusting some of its branches through the shattered panes and stretching out leafy buds as if to take a peep within; while through the fissures of the great door the weeds on the threshold threatened to encroach upon the nave. Amid all this quickening life, the big Christ, still in shadow, alone displayed signs of death, the sufferings of ochre-daubed and lake-bespattered flesh. A sparrow raised himself up for a moment at the edge of a hole, took a glance, then flew away; but only to reappear almost immediately when with noiseless wing he dropped between the benches before the Virgin's altar. A second sparrow followed; and soon from all the boughs of the rowan tree came others that calmly hopped about the flags.

'*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth*,' said the priest in a low tone, whilst slightly stooping.

Vincent rang the little bell thrice; and the sparrows, scared by the sudden tinkling, flew off with such a mighty buzz of wings that La Teuse, who had just gone back into the sacristy, came out again, grumbling; 'The little rascals! they will mess everything. I'll bet that Mademoiselle Desiree has been here again to scatter bread-crumbs for them.'

The dread moment was at hand. The body and the blood of a God were about to descend upon the altar. The priest kissed the altar-cloth, clasped his hands, and multiplied signs of the cross over host and chalice. The prayers of the canon of the mass now fell from his lips in a very ecstasy of humility and gratitude. His attitude, his gestures, the inflections of his voice, all expressed his consciousness of his littleness, his emotion at being selected for so great a task. Vincent came and knelt beside him, lightly lifted the chasuble with his left hand, the bell ready in his right; and the priest, his elbows resting on the edge of the altar, holding the host with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands, pronounced over it the words of consecration: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. Then having bowed the knee before it, he raised it slowly as high as his hands could reach, following it upwards with his eyes, while the kneeling server rang the bell thrice. Then he consecrated the wine —*Hic est enim calix*– leaning once more upon his elbows, bowing, raising the cup aloft, his right hand round the stem, his left holding its base, and his eyes following it aloft. Again the server rang the bell three times. The great mystery of the Redemption had once more been repeated, once more had the adorable Blood flowed forth.

'Just you wait a bit,' growled La Teuse, as she tried to scare away the sparrows with outstretched fist.

But the sparrows were now fearless. They had come back even while the bell was ringing, and, unabashed, were fluttering about the benches. The repeated tinklings even roused them into liveliness, and they answered back with little chirps which crossed amid the Latin words of prayer, like the rippling laughs of free urchins. The sun warmed their plumage, the sweet poverty of the church captivated them. They felt at home there, as in some barn whose shutters had been left open, and screeched, fought, and squabbled over the crumbs they found upon the floor. One flew to perch himself on the smiling Virgin's golden veil; another, whose daring put the old servant in a towering rage, made a hasty reconnaissance of La Teuse's skirts. And at the altar, the priest, with every faculty absorbed, his eyes fixed upon the sacred host, his thumbs and forefingers joined, did not even hear this invasion of the warm May morning, this rising flood of sunlight, greenery and birds, which overflowed even to the foot of the Calvary where doomed nature was wrestling in the death-throes.

'*Per omnia soecula soeculorum*,' he said.

'Amen,' answered Vincent.

The *Pater* ended, the priest, holding the host over the chalice, broke it in the centre. Detaching a particle from one of the halves, he dropped it into the precious blood, to symbolise the intimate union into which he was about to enter with God. He said the *Agnus Dei* aloud, softly recited the three prescribed prayers, and made his act of unworthiness, and then with his elbows resting on the altar, and with the paten beneath his chin, he partook of both portions of the host at once. After a fervent meditation, with his hands clasped before his face, he took the paten and gathered from the corporal the sacred particles of the host that had fallen, and dropped them into the chalice. One particle which had adhered to his thumb he removed with his forefinger. And, crossing himself, chalice in hand, with the paten once again below his chin, he drank all the precious blood in three draughts, never taking his lips from the cup's rim, but imbibing the divine Sacrifice to the last drop.

Vincent had risen to fetch the cruets from the credence table. But suddenly the door of the passage leading to the parsonage flew open and swung back against the wall, to admit a handsome child-like girl of twenty-two, who carried something hidden in her apron.

'Thirteen of them,' she called out. 'All the eggs were good.' And she opened out her apron and revealed a brood of little shivering chicks, with sprouting down and beady black eyes. 'Do just look,' said she; 'aren't they sweet little pets, the darlings! Oh, look at the little white one climbing on the

others' backs! and the spotted one already flapping his tiny wings! The eggs were a splendid lot; not one of them unfertile.'

La Teuse, who was helping to serve the mass in spite of all prohibitions, and was at that very moment handing the cruets to Vincent for the ablutions, thereupon turned round and loudly exclaimed: 'Do be quiet, Mademoiselle Desiree! Don't you see we haven't finished yet?'

Through the open doorway now came the strong smell of a farmyard, blowing like some generative ferment into the church amidst the warm sunlight that was creeping over the altar. Desiree stood there for a moment delighted with the little ones she carried, watching Vincent pour, and her brother drink, the purifying wine, in order that nought of the sacred elements should be left within his mouth. And she stood there still when he came back to the side of the altar, holding the chalice in both hands, so that Vincent might pour over his forefingers and thumbs the wine and water of ablution, which he likewise drank. But when the mother hen ran up clucking with alarm to seek her little ones, and threatened to force her way into the church, Desiree went off, talking maternally to her chicks, while the priest, after pressing the purificator to his lips, wiped first the rim and next the interior of the chalice.

Then came the end, the act of thanksgiving to God. For the last time the server removed the Missal, and brought it back to the right-hand side. The priest replaced the purificator, paten, and pall upon the chalice; once more pinched the two large folds of the veil together, and laid upon it the burse containing the corporal. His whole being was now one act of ardent thanksgiving. He besought from Heaven the forgiveness of his sins, the grace of a holy life, and the reward of everlasting life. He remained as if overwhelmed by this miracle of love, the ever-recurring immolation, which sustained him day by day with the blood and flesh of his Savior.

Having read the final prayers, he turned and said: '*Ite, missa est*.'

'*Deo gratias*,' answered Vincent.

And having turned back to kiss the altar, the priest faced round anew, his left hand just below his breast, his right outstretched whilst blessing the church, which the gladsome sunbeams and noisy sparrows filled.

'*Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus, Pater et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus*.'

'*Amen*,' said the server, as he crossed himself.

The sun had risen higher, and the sparrows were growing bolder. While the priest read from the left-hand altar-card the passage of the Gospel of St. John, announcing the eternity of the Word, the sunrays set the altar ablaze, whitened the panels of imitation marble, and dimmed the flame of the two candles, whose short wicks were now merely two dull spots. The victorious orb enveloped with his glory the crucifix, the candlesticks, the chasuble, the veil of the chalice – all the gold work that paled beneath his beams. And when at last the priest, after taking the chalice in his hands and making a genuflexion, covered his head and turned from the altar to follow the server, laden with the cruets and finger-cloth, to the sacristy, the planet remained sole master of the church. Its rays in turn now rested on the altar-cloth, irradiating the tabernacle-door with splendour, and celebrating the fertile powers of May. Warmth rose from the stone flags. The daubed walls, the tall Virgin, the huge Christ, too, all seemed to quiver as with shooting sap, as if death had been conquered by the earth's eternal youth.

III

Le Teuse hastily put out the candles, but lingered to make one last attempt to drive away the sparrows, and so when she returned to the sacristy with the Missal she no longer found Abbe Mouret there. Having washed his hands and put away the sacred vessels and vestments, he was now standing in the dining room, breakfasting off a cup of milk.

'You really ought to prevent your sister from scattering bread in the church,' said La Teuse on coming in. 'It was last winter she hit upon that pretty prank. She said the sparrows were cold, and that God might well give them some food. You see, she'll end by making us sleep with all her fowls and rabbits.'

'We should be all the warmer,' pleasantly replied the young priest. 'You are always grumbling, La Teuse. Do let our poor Desiree pet her animals. She has no other pleasure, poor innocent!'

The servant took her stand in the centre of the room.

'I do believe you yourself wouldn't mind a bit if the magpies actually built their nests in the church. You never can see anything, everything seems just what it ought to be to you. Your sister is precious lucky in having had you to take charge of her when you left the seminary. No father, no mother. I should like to know who would let her mess about as she does in a farmyard.'

Then softening, she added in a gentler tone: 'To be sure, it would be a pity to cross her. She hasn't a touch of malice in her. She's like a child of ten, although she's one of the finest grown girls in the neighbourhood. And I have to put her to bed, as you know, every night, and send her to sleep with stories, just like a little child.'

Abbe Mouret had remained standing, finishing the cup of milk he held between his fingers, which were slightly reddened by the chill atmosphere of the dining-room – a large room with painted grey walls, a floor of square tiles, and having no furniture beyond a table and a few chairs. La Teuse picked up a napkin which she had laid at a corner of the table in readiness for breakfast.

'It isn't much linen you dirty,' she muttered. 'One would think you could never sit down, that you are always just about to start off. Ah! if you had known Monsieur Caffin, the poor dead priest whose place you have taken! What a man he was for comfort! Why, he couldn't have digested his food, if he had eaten standing. A Norman he was, from Canteleu, like myself. I don't thank him, I tell you, for having brought me to such a wild-beast country as this. When first we came, O, Lord! how bored we were! But the poor priest had had some uncomfortable tales going about him at home… Why, sir, didn't you sweeten your milk, then? Aren't those the two lumps of sugar?'

The priest put down his cup.

'Yes, I must have forgotten, I believe,' he said.

La Teuse stared at him and shrugged her shoulders. She folded up inside the napkin a slice of stale home-made bread which had also been left untouched on the table. Then just as the priest was about to go out, she ran after him and knelt down at his feet, exclaiming: 'Stop, your shoe-laces are not even fastened. I cannot imagine how your feet can stand those peasant shoes, you're such a little, tender man and look as if you had been preciously spoilt! Ah, the bishop must have known a deal about you, to go and give you the poorest living in the department.'

'But it was I who chose Les Artaud,' said the priest, breaking into another smile. 'You are very bad-tempered this morning, La Teuse. Are we not happy here? We have got all we want, and our life is as peaceful as if in paradise.'

She then restrained herself and laughed in her turn, saying: 'You are a holy man, Monsieur le Cure. But come and see what a splendid wash I have got. That will be better than squabbling with one another.'

The priest was obliged to follow, for she might prevent him going out at all if he did not compliment her on her washing. As he left the dining-room he stumbled over a heap of rubbish in the passage.

'What is this?' he asked.

Oh, nothing,' said La Teuse in her grimest tone. 'It's only the parsonage coming down. However, you are quite content, you've got all you want. Good heavens! there are holes and to spare. Just look at that ceiling, now. Isn't it cracked all over? If we don't get buried alive one of these days, we shall owe a precious big taper to our guardian angel. However, if it suits you – It's like the church. Those broken panes ought to have been replaced these two years. In winter our Lord gets frozen with the cold. Besides, it would keep out those rascally sparrows. I shall paste paper over the holes. You see if I don't.'

'A capital idea,' murmured the priest, 'they might very well be pasted over. As to the walls, they are stouter than we think. In my room, the floor has only given way slightly in front of the window. The house will see us all buried.'

On reaching the little open shed near the kitchen, in order to please La Teuse he went into ecstasies over the washing; he even had to dip his fingers into it and feel it. This so pleased the old woman that her attentions became quite motherly. She no longer scolded, but ran to fetch a clothes-brush, saying: 'You surely are not going out with yesterday's mud on your cassock! If you had left it out on the banister, it would be clean now – it's still a good one. But do lift it up well when you cross any field. The thistles tear everything.'

While speaking she kept turning him round like a child, shaking him from head to foot with her energetic brushing.

'There, there, that will do,' he said, escaping from her at last. 'Take care of Desiree, won't you? I will tell her I am going out.'

But at this minute a fresh clear voice called to him: 'Serge! Serge!'

Desiree came flying up, her cheeks ruddy with glee, her head bare, her black locks twisted tightly upon her neck, and her hands and arms smothered up to the elbows with manure. She had been cleaning out her poultry house. When she caught sight of her brother just about to go out with his breviary under his arm, she laughed aloud, and kissed him on his mouth, with her arms thrown back behind her to avoid soiling him.

'No, no,' she hurriedly exclaimed, 'I should dirty you. Oh! I am having such fun! You must see the animals when you come back.'

Thereupon she fled away again. Abbe Mouret then said that he would be back about eleven for luncheon, and as he started, La Teuse, who had followed him to the doorstep, shouted after him her last injunctions.

'Don't forget to see Brother Archangias. And look in also at the Brichets'; the wife came again yesterday about that wedding. Just listen, Monsieur le Cure! I met their Rosalie. She'd ask nothing better than to marry big Fortune. Have a talk with old Bambousse; perhaps he will listen to you now. And don't come back at twelve o'clock, like the other day. Come, say you'll be back at eleven, won't you?'

But the priest turned round no more. So she went in again, growling between her teeth:

'When does he ever listen to me? Barely twenty-six years old and does just as he likes. To be sure, he's an old man of sixty for holiness; but then he has never known life; he knows nothing, it's no trouble to him to be as good as a cherub!'

IV

When Abbe Mouret had got beyond all hearing of La Teuse he stopped, thankful to be alone at last. The church was built on a hillock, which sloped down gently to the village. With its large gaping windows and bright red tiles, it stretched out like a deserted sheep-cote. The priest turned round and glanced at the parsonage, a greyish building springing from the very side of the church; but as if fearful that he might again be overtaken by the interminable chatter that had been buzzing in his ears ever since morning, he turned up to the right again, and only felt safe when he at last stood before the great doorway, where he could not be seen from the parsonage. The front of the church, quite bare and worn by the sunshine and rain of years, was crowned by a narrow open stone belfry, in which a small bell showed its black silhouette, whilst its rope disappeared through the tiles. Six broken steps, on one side half buried in the earth, led up to the lofty arched door, now cracked, smothered with dust and rust and cobwebs, and so frailly hung upon its outwrenched hinges that it seemed as if the first slight puff would secure free entrance to the winds of heaven. Abbe Mouret, who had an affection for this dilapidated door, leaned against one of its leaves as he stood upon the steps. Thence he could survey the whole country round at a glance. And shading his eyes with his hands he scanned the horizon.

In the month of May exuberant vegetation burst forth from that stony soil. Gigantic lavenders, juniper bushes, patches of rank herbage swarmed over the church threshold, and scattered clumps of dark greenery even to the very tiles. It seemed as if the first throb of shooting sap in the tough matted underwood might well topple the church over. At that early hour, amid all the travail of nature's growth, there was a hum of vivifying warmth, and the very rocks quivered as with a long and silent effort. But the Abbe failed to comprehend the ardour of nature's painful labour; he simply thought that the steps were tottering, and thereupon leant against the other side of the door.

The countryside stretched away for a distance of six miles, bounded by a wall of tawny hills speckled with black pine-woods. It was a fearful landscape of arid wastes and rocky spurs rending the soil. The few patches of arable ground were like scattered pools of blood, red fields with rows of lean almond trees, grey-topped olive trees and long lines of vines, streaking the soil with their brown stems. It was as if some huge conflagration had swept by there, scattering the ashes of forests over the hill-tops, consuming all the grass of the meadow lands, and leaving its glare and furnace-like heat behind in the hollows. Only here and there was the softer note of a pale green patch of growing corn. The landscape generally was wild, lacking even a threadlet of water, dying of thirst, and flying away in clouds of dust at the least breath of wind. But at the farthest point where the crumbling hills on the horizon had left a breach one espied some distant fresh moist greenery, a stretch of the neighbouring valley fertilised by the Viorne, a river flowing down from the gorges of the Seille.

The priest lowered his dazzled glance upon the village, whose few scattered houses straggled away below the church – wretched hovels they were of rubble and boards strewn along a narrow path without sign of streets. There were about thirty of them altogether, some squatting amidst muck-heaps, and black with woeful want; others roomier and more cheerful-looking with their roofs of pinkish tiles. Strips of garden, victoriously planted amidst stony soil, displayed plots of vegetables enclosed by quickset hedges. At this hour Les Artaud was empty, not a woman was at the windows, not a child was wallowing in the dust; parties of fowls alone went to and fro, ferreting among the straw, seeking food up to the very thresholds of the houses, whose open doors gaped in the sunlight. A big black dog seated on his haunches at the entrance to the village seemed to be mounting guard over it.

Languor slowly stole over Abbe Mouret. The rising sun steeped him in such warmth that he leant back against the church door pervaded by a feeling of happy restfulness. His thoughts were dwelling on that hamlet of Les Artaud, which had sprung up there among the stones like one of the knotty growths of the valley. All its inhabitants were related, all bore the same name, so that from their very

cradle they were distinguished among themselves by nicknames. An Artaud, their ancestor, had come hither and settled like a pariah in this waste. His family had grown with all the wild vitality of the herbage that sucked life from the rocky boulders. It had at last become a tribe, a rural community, in which cousin-ships were lost in the mists of centuries. They intermarried with shameless promiscuity. Not an instance could be cited of any Artaud taking himself a wife from any neighbouring village; only some of the girls occasionally went elsewhere. The others were born and died fixed to that spot, leisurely increasing and multiplying on their dunghills with the irreflectiveness of trees, and with no definite notion of the world that lay beyond the tawny rocks, in whose midst they vegetated. And yet there were already rich and poor among them; fowls having at times disappeared, the fowl-houses were now closed at night with stout padlocks; moreover one Artaud had killed another Artaud one evening behind the mill. These folk, begirt by that belt of desolate hills, were truly a people apart – a race sprung from the soil, a miniature replica of mankind, three hundred souls all told, beginning the centuries yet once again.

Over the priest the sombre shadows of seminary life still hovered. For years he had never seen the sun. He perceived it not even now, his eyes closed and gazing inwards on his soul, and with no feeling for perishable nature, fated to damnation, save contempt. For a long time in his hours of devout thought he had dreamt of some hermit's desert, of some mountain hole, where no living thing – neither being, plant, nor water – should distract him from the contemplation of God. It was an impulse springing from the purest love, from a loathing of all physical sensation. There, dying to self, and with his back turned to the light of day, he would have waited till he should cease to be, till nothing should remain of him but the sovereign whiteness of the soul. To him heaven seemed all white, with a luminous whiteness as if lilies there snowed down upon one, as if every form of purity, innocence, and chastity there blazed. But his confessor reproved him whenever he related his longings for solitude, his cravings for an existence of Godlike purity; and recalled him to the struggles of the Church, the necessary duties of the priesthood. Later on, after his ordination, the young priest had come to Les Artaud at his own request, there hoping to realise his dream of human annihilation. In that desolate spot, on that barren soil, he might shut his ears to all worldly sounds, and live the dreamy life of a saint. For some months past, in truth, his existence had been wholly undisturbed, rarely had any thrill of the village-life disturbed him; and even the sun's heat scarcely brought him any glow of feeling as he walked the paths, his whole being wrapped in heaven, heedless of the unceasing travail of life amidst which he moved.

The big black dog watching over Les Artaud had determined to come up to Abbe Mouret, and now sat upon its haunches at the priest's feet; but the unconscious man remained absorbed amidst the sweetness of the morning. On the previous evening he had begun the exercises of the Rosary, and to the intercession of the Virgin with her Divine Son he attributed the great joy which filled his soul. How despicable appeared all the good things of the earth! How thankfully he recognised his poverty! When he entered into holy orders, after losing on the same day both his father and his mother through a tragedy the fearful details of which were even now unknown to him,[2] he had relinquished all his share of their property to an elder brother. His only remaining link with the world was his sister; he had undertaken the care of her, stirred by a kind of religious affection for her feeble intelligence. The dear innocent was so childish, such a very little girl, that she recalled to him the poor in spirit to whom the Gospel promises the kingdom of heaven. Of late, however, she had somewhat disturbed him; she was growing too lusty, too full of health and life. But his discomfort was yet of the slightest. His days were spent in that inner life he had created for himself, for which he had relinquished all else. He closed the portals of his senses, and sought to free himself from all bodily needs, so that he might be but a soul enrapt in contemplation. To him nature offered only snares and abominations; he gloried in maltreating her, in despising her, in releasing himself from his human slime. And as the just man

[2] This forms the subject of M. Zola's novel, *The Conquest of Plassans*. ED.

must be a fool according to the world, he considered himself an exile on this earth; his thoughts were solely fixed upon the favours of Heaven, incapable as he was of understanding how an eternity of bliss could be weighed against a few hours of perishable enjoyment. His reason duped him and his senses lied; and if he advanced in virtue it was particularly by humility and obedience. His wish was to be the last of all, one subject to all, in order that the divine dew might fall upon his heart as upon arid sand; he considered himself overwhelmed with reproach and with confusion, unworthy of ever being saved from sin. He no longer belonged to himself – blind, deaf, dead to the world as he was. He was God's thing. And from the depth of the abjectness to which he sought to plunge, Hosannahs suddenly bore him aloft, above the happy and the mighty into the splendour of never-ending bliss.

Thus, at Les Artaud, Abbe Mouret had once more experienced, each time he read the 'Imitation,' the raptures of the cloistered life which he had longed for at one time so ardently. As yet he had not had to fight any battle. From the moment that he knelt down, he became perfect, absolutely oblivious of the flesh, unresisting, undisturbed, as if overpowered by the Divine grace. Such ecstasy at God's approach is well known to some young priests: it is a blissful moment when all is hushed, and the only desire is but a boundless craving for purity. From no human creature had he sought his consolations. He who believes a certain thing to be all in all cannot be troubled: and he did believe that God was all in all, and that humility, obedience, and chastity were everything. He could remember having heard temptation spoken of as an abominable torture that tries the holiest. But he would only smile: God had never left him. He bore his faith about him thus like a breast-plate protecting him from the slightest breath of evil. He could recall how he had hidden himself and wept for very love; he knew not whom he loved, but he wept for love, for love of some one afar off. The recollection never failed to move him. Later on he had decided on becoming a priest in order to satisfy that craving for a superhuman affection which was his sole torment. He could not see where greater love could be. In that state of life he satisfied his being, his inherited predisposition, his youthful dreams, his first virile desires. If temptation must come, he awaited it with the calmness of the seminarist ignorant of the world. He felt that his manhood had been killed in him: it gladdened him to feel himself a creature set apart, unsexed, turned from the usual paths of life, and, as became a lamb of the Lord, marked with the tonsure.

V

While the priest pondered the sun was heating the big church-door. Gilded flies buzzed round a large flower that was blooming between two of the church-door steps. Abbe Mouret, feeling slightly dazed, was at last about to move away, when the big black dog sprang, barking violently, towards the iron gate of the little graveyard on the left of the church. At the same time a harsh voice called out: 'Ah! you young rascal! So you stop away from school, and I find you in the graveyard! Oh, don't say no: I have been watching you this quarter of an hour.'

As the priest stepped forward he saw Vincent, whom a Brother of the Christian Schools was clutching tightly by the ear. The lad was suspended, as it were, over a ravine skirting the graveyard, at the bottom of which flowed the Mascle, a mountain torrent whose crystal waters plunged into the Viorne, six miles away.

'Brother Archangias!' softly called the priest, as if to appease the fearful man.

The Brother, however, did not release the boy's ear.

'Oh, it's you, Monsieur le Cure?' he growled. 'Just fancy, this rascal is always poking his nose into the graveyard. I don't know what he can be up to here. I ought to let go of him and let him smash his skull down there. It would be what he deserves.'

The lad remained dumb, with his cunning eyes tight shut as he clung to the bushes.

'Take care, Brother Archangias,' continued the priest, 'he might slip.'

And he himself helped Vincent to scramble up again.

'Come, my young friend, what were you doing there?' he asked. 'You must not go playing in graveyards.'

The lad had opened his eyes, and crept away, fearfully, from the Brother, to place himself under the priest's protection.

'I'll tell you,' he said in a low voice, as he raised his bushy head. 'There is a tomtit's nest in the brambles there, under that rock. For over ten days I've been watching it, and now the little ones are hatched, so I came this morning after serving your mass.'

'A tomtit's nest!' exclaimed Brother Archangias. 'Wait a bit! wait a bit!'

Thereupon he stepped aside, picked a clod of earth off a grave and flung it into the brambles. But he missed the nest. Another clod, however, more skilfully thrown upset the frail cradle, and precipitated the fledglings into the torrent below.

'Now, perhaps,' he continued, clapping his hands to shake off the earth that soiled them, 'you won't come roaming here any more, like a heathen; the dead will pull your feet at night if you go walking over them again.'

Vincent, who had laughed at seeing the nest dive into the stream, looked round him and shrugged his shoulders like one of strong mind.

'Oh, I'm not afraid,' he said. 'Dead folk don't stir.'

The graveyard, in truth, was not a place to inspire fear. It was a barren piece of ground whose narrow paths were smothered by rank weeds. Here and there the soil was bossy with mounds. A single tombstone, that of Abbe Caffin, brand-new and upright, could be perceived in the centre of the ground. Save this, all around there were only broken fragments of crosses, withered tufts of box, and old slabs split and moss-eaten. There were not two burials a year. Death seemed to make no dwelling in that waste spot, whither La Teuse came every evening to fill her apron with grass for Desiree's rabbits. A gigantic cypress tree, standing near the gate, alone cast shadow upon the desert field. This cypress, a landmark visible for nine miles around, was known to the whole countryside as the Solitaire.

'It's full of lizards,' added Vincent, looking at the cracks of the church-wall. 'One could have a fine lark – '

But he sprang out with a bound on seeing the Brother lift his foot. The latter proceeded to call the priest's attention to the dilapidated state of the gate, which was not only eaten up with rust, but had one hinge off, and the lock broken.

'It ought to be repaired,' said he.

Abbe Mouret smiled, but made no reply. Addressing Vincent, who was romping with the dog: 'I say, my boy,' he asked, 'do you know where old Bambousse is at work this morning?'

The lad glanced towards the horizon. 'He must be at his Olivettes field now,' he answered, pointing towards the left. 'But Voriau will show your reverence the way. He's sure to know where his master is.' And he clapped his hands and called: 'Hie! Voriau! hie!'

The big black dog paused a moment, wagging his tail, and seeking to read the urchin's eyes. Then, barking joyfully, he set off down the slope to the village. Abbe Mouret and Brother Archangias followed him, chatting. A hundred yards further Vincent surreptitiously bolted, and again glided up towards the church, keeping a watchful eye upon them, and ready to dart behind a bush if they should look round. With adder-like suppleness, he once more glided into the graveyard, that paradise full of lizards, nests, and flowers.

Meantime, while Voriau led the way before them along the dusty road, Brother Archangias was angrily saying to the priest: 'Let be! Monsieur le Cure, they're spawn of damnation, those toads are! They ought to have their backs broken, to make them pleasing to God. They grow up in irreligion, like their fathers. Fifteen years have I been here, and not one Christian have I been able to turn out. The minute they quit my hands, good-bye! They think of nothing but their land, their vines, their olive-trees. Not one ever sets foot in church. Brute beasts they are, struggling with their stony fields! Guide them with the stick, Monsieur le Cure, yes, the stick!'

Then, after drawing breath, he added with a terrific wave of his hands:

'Those Artauds, look you, are like the brambles over-running these rocks. One stem has been enough to poison the whole district. They cling on, they multiply, they live in spite of everything. Nothing short of fire from heaven, as at Gomorrha, will clear it all away.'

'We should never despair of sinners,' said Abbe Mouret, all inward peacefulness, as he leisurely walked on.

'But these are the devil's own,' broke in the Brother still more violently. 'I've been a peasant, too. Up to eighteen I dug the earth; and later on, when I was at the Training College, I had to sweep, pare vegetables, do all the heavy work. It's not their toilsome labour I find fault with. On the contrary, for God prefers the lowly. But the Artauds live like beasts! They are like their dogs, they never attend mass, and make a mock of the commandments of God and of the Church. They think of nothing but their plots of lands, so sweet they are on them!'

Voriau, his tail wagging, kept stopping and moving on again as soon as he saw that they still followed him.

'There certainly are some grievous things going on,' said Abbe Mouret. 'My predecessor, Abbe Caffin – '

'A poor specimen,' interrupted the Brother. 'He came here to us from Normandy owing to some disreputable affair. Once here, his sole thought was good living; he let everything go to rack and ruin.'

'Oh, no, Abbe Caffin certainly did what he could; but I must own that his efforts were all but barren in results. My own are mostly fruitless.'

Brother Archangias shrugged his shoulders. He walked on for a minute in silence, swaying his tall bony frame, which looked as if it had been roughly fashioned with a hatchet. The sun beat down upon his neck, shadowing his hard, sword-edged peasant's face.

'Listen to me, Monsieur le Cure,' he said at last. 'I am too much beneath you to lecture you; but still, I am almost double your age, I know this part, and therefore I feel justified in telling you that you will gain nothing by gentleness. The catechism, understand, is enough. God has no mercy on the wicked. He burns them. Stick to that.'

Then, as Abbe Mouret, whose head remained bowed, did not open his mouth, he went on: 'Religion is leaving the country districts because it is made over indulgent. It was respected when it spoke out like an unforgiving mistress. I really don't know what they can teach you now in the seminaries. The new priests weep like children with their parishioners. God no longer seems the same. I dare say, Monsieur le Cure, that you don't even know your catechism by heart now?'

But the priest, wounded by the imperiousness with which the Brother so roughly sought to dominate him, looked up and dryly rejoined:

'That will do, your zeal is very praiseworthy. But haven't you something to tell me? You came to the parsonage this morning, did you not?'

Thereupon Brother Archangias plumply answered: 'I had to tell you just what I have told you. The Artauds live like pigs. Only yesterday I learned that Rosalie, old Bambousse's eldest daughter, is in the family way. It happens with all of them before they get married. And they simply laugh at reproaches, as you know.'

'Yes,' murmured Abbe Mouret, 'it is a great scandal. I am just on my way to see old Bambousse to speak to him about it; it is desirable that they should be married as soon as possible. The child's father, it seems, is Fortune, the Brichets' eldest son. Unfortunately the Brichets are poor.'

'That Rosalie, now,' continued the Brother, 'is just eighteen. Not four years since I still had her under me at school, and she was already a gadabout. I have now got her sister Catherine, a chit of eleven, who seems likely to become even worse than her elder. One comes across her in every corner with that little scamp, Vincent. It's no good, you may pull their ears till they bleed, the woman always crops up in them. They carry perdition about with them and are only fit to be thrown on a muck-heap. What a splendid riddance if all girls were strangled at their birth!'

His loathing, his hatred of woman made him swear like a carter. Abbe Mouret, who had been listening to him with unmoved countenance, smiled at last at his rabid utterances. He called Voriau, who had strayed into a field close by.

'There, look there!' cried Brother Archangias, pointing to a group of children playing at the bottom of a ravine, 'there are my young devils, who play the truant under pretence of going to help their parents among the vines! You may be certain that jade of a Catherine is among them… There, didn't I tell you! Till to-night, Monsieur le Cure. Oh, just you wait, you rascals!'

Off he went at a run, his dirty neckband flying over his shoulder, and his big greasy cassock tearing up the thistles. Abbe Mouret watched him swoop down into the midst of the children, who scattered like frightened sparrows. But he succeeded in seizing Catherine and one boy by the ears and led them back towards the village, clutching them tightly with his big hairy fingers, and overwhelming them with abuse.

The priest walked on again. Brother Archangias sometimes aroused strange scruples in his mind. With his vulgarity and coarseness the Brother seemed to him the true man of God, free from earthly ties, submissive in all to Heaven's will, humble, blunt, ready to shower abuse upon sin. He, the priest, would then feel despair at his inability to rid himself more completely of his body; he regretted that he was not ugly, unclean, covered with vermin like some of the saints. Whenever the Brother had wounded him by some words of excessive coarseness, or by some over-hasty churlishness, he would blame himself for his refinement, his innate shrinking, as if these were really faults. Ought he not to be dead to all the weaknesses of this world? And this time also he smiled sadly as he thought how near he had been to losing his temper at the Brother's roughly put lesson. It was pride, it seemed to him, seeking to work his perdition by making him despise the lowly. However, in spite of himself, he felt relieved at being alone again, at being able to walk on gently, reading his breviary, free at last from the grating voice that had disturbed his dream of heavenly love.

VI

The road wound on between fallen rocks, among which the peasants had succeeded here and there in reclaiming six or seven yards of chalky soil, planted with old olive trees. Under the priest's feet the dust in the deep ruts crackled lightly like snow. At times, as he felt a warmer puff upon his face, he would raise his eyes from his book, as if to seek whence came this soft caress; but his gaze was vacant, straying without perception over the glowing horizon, over the twisted outlines of that passion-breathing landscape as it stretched out in the sun before him, dry, barren, despairing of the fertilisation for which it longed. And he would lower his hat over his forehead to protect himself against the warm breeze and tranquilly resume his reading, his cassock raising behind him a cloudlet of dust which rolled along the surface of the road.

'Good morning, Monsieur le Cure,' a passing peasant said to him.

Sounds of digging alongside the cultivated strips of ground again roused him from his abstraction. He turned his head and perceived big knotty-limbed old men greeting him from among the vines. The Artauds were eagerly satisfying their passion for the soil, in the sun's full blaze. Sweating brows appeared from behind the bushes, heaving chests were slowly raised, the whole scene was one of ardent fructification, through which he moved with the calm step born of ignorance. No discomfort came to him from the great travail of love that permeated that splendid morning.

'Steady! Voriau, you mustn't eat people!' some one gaily shouted in a powerful voice by way of silencing the dog's loud barks.

Abbe Mouret looked up.

'Oh! it's you. Fortune?' he said, approaching the edge of the field in which the young peasant was at work. 'I was just on my way to speak to you.'

Fortune was of the same age as the priest: a bigly built, bold-looking young fellow, with skin already hardened. He was clearing a small plot of stony heath.

'What about, Monsieur le Cure?' he asked.

'About Rosalie and you,' replied the priest.

Fortune began to laugh. Perhaps he thought it droll that a priest should interest himself in such a matter.

'Well,' he muttered, 'I'm not to blame in it nor she either. So much the worse if old Bambousse refuses to let me have her. You saw yourself how his dog was trying to bite me just now; he sets him on me.'

Then, as Abbe Mouret was about to continue, old Artaud, called Brichet, whom he had not previously perceived, emerged from the shadow of a bush behind which he and his wife were eating. He was a little man, withered by age, with a cringing face.

'Your reverence must have been told a pack of lies,' he exclaimed. 'The youngster is quite ready to marry Rosalie. What's happened isn't anybody's fault. It has happened to others who got on all right just the same. The matter doesn't rest with us. You ought to speak to Bambousse. He's the one who looks down on us because he's got money.'

'Yes, we are very poor,' whined his wife, a tall lachrymose woman, who also rose to her feet. 'We've only this scrap of ground where the very devil seems to have been hailing stones. Not a bite of bread from it, even. Without you, your reverence, life would be impossible.'

Brichet's wife was the one solitary devotee of the village. Whenever she had been to communion, she would hang about the parsonage, well knowing that La Teuse always kept a couple of loaves for her from her last baking. At times she was even able to carry off a rabbit or a fowl given her by Desiree.

'There's no end to the scandals,' continued the priest. 'The marriage must take place without delay.'

'Oh! at once! as soon as the others are agreeable,' said the old woman, alarmed about her periodical presents. 'What do you say, Brichet? we are not such bad Christians as to go against his reverence?'

Fortune sniggered.

'Oh, I'm quite ready,' he said, 'and so is Rosalie. I saw her yesterday at the back of the mill. We haven't quarrelled. We stopped there to have a bit of a laugh.'

But Abbe Mouret interrupted him: 'Very well, I am now going to speak to Bambousse. He is over there, at Les Olivettes, I believe.'

The priest was going off when the mother asked him what had become of her younger son Vincent, who had left in the early morning to serve mass. There was a lad now who badly needed his reverence's admonitions. And she walked by the priest's side for another hundred yards, bemoaning her poverty, the failure of the potato crop, the frost which had nipped the olive trees, the hot weather which threatened to scorch up the scanty corn. Then, as she left him, she solemnly declared that her son Fortune always said his prayers, both morning and evening.

Voriau now ran on in front, and suddenly, at a turn in the road, he bolted across the fields. The priest then struck into a small path leading up a low hill. He was now at Les Olivettes, the most fertile spot in the neighbourhood, where the mayor of the commune, Artaud, otherwise Bambousse, owned several fields of corn, olive plantations, and vines. The dog was now romping round the skirts of a tall brunette, who burst into a loud laugh as she caught sight of the priest.

'Is your father here, Rosalie?' the latter asked.

'Yes, just across there,' she said, pointing with her hand and still smiling.

Leaving the part of the field she had been weeding, she walked on before him with the vigorous springiness of a hard-working woman, her head unshielded from the sun, her neck all sunburnt, her hair black and coarse like a horse's mane. Her green-stained hands exhaled the odour of the weeds she had been pulling up.

'Father,' she called out, 'here's Monsieur le Cure asking for you.'

And there she remained, bold, unblushing, with a sly smile still hovering over her features. Bambousse, a stout, sweating, round-faced man, left his work and gaily came towards the priest.

'I'd take my oath you are going to speak to me about the repairs of the church,' he exclaimed, as he clapped his earthy hands. 'Well, then, Monsieur le Cure, I can only say no, it's impossible. The commune hasn't got the coin. If the Lord provides plaster and tiles, we'll provide the workmen.'

At this jest of his the unbelieving peasant burst into a loud guffaw, slapped his thighs, coughed, and almost choked himself.

'It was not for the church I came,' replied the Abbe Mouret. 'I wanted to speak to you about your daughter Rosalie.'

'Rosalie? What has she done to you, then?' inquired Bambousse, his eyes blinking.

The girl was boldly staring at the young priest, scrutinising his white hands and slender, feminine neck, as if trying to make him redden. He, however, bluntly and with unruffled countenance, as if speaking of something quite indifferent, continued:

'You know what I mean, Bambousse. She must get married.'

'Oh, that's it, is it?' muttered the old man, with a bantering look. 'Many thanks for the message. The Brichets sent you, didn't they? Mother Brichet goes to mass, and so you give her a helping hand to marry her son – it's all very fine. But, I've got nothing to do with that. It doesn't suit me. That's all.'

Thereupon the astonished priest represented to him that the scandal must be stopped, and that he ought to forgive Fortune, as the latter was willing to make reparation for his transgression, and that, lastly, his daughter's reputation demanded a speedy marriage.

'Ta, ta, ta,' replied Bambousse, what a lot of words! I shall keep my daughter, please understand it. All that's got nothing to do with me. That Fortune is a beggarly pauper, without a brass farthing. What an easy job, if one could marry a girl like that! At that rate we should have all the young

things marrying off morning and night. Thank Heaven! I'm not worried about Rosalie: everybody knows what has happened; but it makes no difference. She can marry any one she chooses in the neighbourhood.'

'But the child?' interrupted the priest.

'The child indeed! There'll be time enough to think of that when it's born.'

Rosalie, perceiving the turn the priest's application was taking, now thought it proper to ram her fists into her eyes and whimper. And she even let herself fall upon the ground.

'Shut up, will you, you hussy!' howled her father in a rage. And he proceeded to revile her in the coarsest terms, which made her laugh silently behind her clenched fists.

'You won't shut up? won't you? Just wait a minute then, you jade!' continued old Bambousse. And thereupon he picked up a clod of earth and flung it at her. It burst upon her knot of hair, crumbling down her neck and smothering her in dust. Dizzy from the blow, she bounded to her feet and fled, sheltering her head between her hands. But Bambousse had time to fling two more clods at her, and if the first only grazed her left shoulder, the next caught her full on the base of the spine, with such force that she fell upon her knees.

'Bambousse!' cried the priest, as he wrenched from the peasant's hand a number of stones which he had just picked up.

'Let be, Monsieur le Cure,' said the other. 'It was only soft earth. I ought to have thrown these stones at her. It's easy to see that you don't know girls. Hard as nails, all of them. I might duck that one in the well, I might break all her bones with a cudgel, and she'd still be just the same. But I've got my eye on her, and if I catch her!.. Ah! well, they are all like that.'

He was already comforted. He took a good pull at a big flat bottle of wine, encased in wicker-work, which lay warming on the hot ground. And breaking once more into a laugh, he said: 'If I only had a glass, Monsieur le Cure, I would offer you some with pleasure.'

'So then,' again asked the priest, 'this marriage?'

'No, it can't be; I should get laughed at. Rosalie is a stout wench. She's worth a man to me. I shall have to hire a lad the day she goes off… We can have another talk about it after the vintage. Besides, I don't want to be robbed. Give and take, say I. That's fair. What do you think?'

Nevertheless for another long half-hour did the priest remain there preaching to Bambousse, speaking to him of God, and plying him with all the reasons suited to the circumstances. But the old man had resumed his work; he shrugged his shoulders, jested, and grew more and more obstinate. At last, he broke out: 'But if you asked me for a sack of corn, you would give me money, wouldn't you? So why do you want me to let my daughter go for nothing?'

Much discomfited, Abbe Mouret left him. As he went down the path he saw Rosalie rolling about under an olive tree with Voriau, who was licking her face. With her arms whirling, she kept on repeating: 'You tickle me, you big stupid. Leave off!'

When she perceived the priest, she made an attempt at a blush, settled her clothes, and once more raised her fists to her eyes. He, on his part, sought to console her by promising to attempt some fresh efforts with her father, adding that, in the meantime, she should do nothing to aggravate her sin. And then, as she impudently smiled at him, he pictured hell, where wicked women burn in torment. And afterwards he left her, his duty done, his soul once more full of the serenity which enabled him to pass undisturbed athwart the corruptions of the world.

VII

The morning was becoming terribly hot. In that huge rocky amphitheatre the sun kindled a furnace-like glare from the moment when the first fine weather began. By the planet's height in the sky Abbe Mouret now perceived that he had only just time to return home if he wished to get there by eleven o'clock and escape a scolding from La Teuse. Having finished reading his breviary and made his application to Bambousse, he swiftly retraced his steps, gazing as he went at his church, now a grey spot in the distance, and at the black rigid silhouette which the big cypress-tree, the Solitaire, set against the blue sky. Amidst the drowsiness fostered by the heat, he thought of how richly that evening he might decorate the Lady chapel for the devotions of the month of Mary. Before him the road offered a carpet of dust, soft to the tread and of dazzling whiteness.

At the Croix-Verte, as the Abbe was about to cross the highway leading from Plassans to La Palud, a gig coming down the hill compelled him to step behind a heap of stones. Then, as he crossed the open space, a voice called to him: 'Hallo, Serge, my boy!'

The gig had pulled up and from it a man leant over. The priest recognised him – he was an uncle of his, Doctor Pascal Rougon, or Monsieur Pascal, as the poor folk of Plassans, whom he attended for nothing, briefly styled him. Although barely over fifty, he was already snowy white, with a big beard and abundant hair, amidst which his handsome regular features took an expression of shrewdness and benevolence.[3]

'So you potter about in the dust at this hour of the day?' he said gaily, as he stooped to grasp the Abbe's hands. 'You're not afraid of sunstroke?'

'No more than you are, uncle,' answered the priest, laughing.

'Oh, I have the hood of my trap to shield me. Besides, sick folks won't wait. People die at all times, my boy.' And he went on to relate that he was now on his way to old Jeanbernat, the steward of the Paradou, who had had an apoplectic stroke the night before. A neighbour, a peasant on his way to Plassans market, had summoned him.

'He must be dead by this time,' the doctor continued. 'However, we must make sure… Those old demons are jolly tough, you know.'

He was already raising his whip, when Abbe Mouret stopped him.

'Stay! what o'clock do you make it, uncle?'

'A quarter to eleven.'

The Abbe hesitated; he already seemed to hear La Teuse's terrible voice bawling in his ears that his luncheon was getting cold. But he plucked up courage and added swiftly: 'I'll go with you, uncle. The unhappy man may wish to reconcile himself to God in his last hour.'

Doctor Pascal could not restrain a laugh.

'What, Jeanbernat!' he said; 'ah, well! if ever you convert him! Never mind, come all the same. The sight of you is enough to cure him.'

The priest got in. The doctor, apparently regretting his jest, displayed an affectionate warmth of manner, whilst from time to time clucking his tongue by way of encouraging his horse. And out of the corner of his eye he inquisitively observed his nephew with the keenness of a scientist bent on taking notes. In short kindly sentences he inquired about his life, his habits, and the peaceful happiness he enjoyed at Les Artaud. And at each satisfactory reply he murmured, as if to himself in a tone of reassurance: 'Come, so much the better; that's just as it should be!'

He displayed peculiar anxiety about the young priest's state of health. And Serge, greatly surprised, assured him that he was in splendid trim, and had neither fits of giddiness or of nausea, nor headaches whatsoever.

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[3] See M. Zola's novels, *Dr. Pascal* and *The Fortune of the Rougons*. – ED.

'Capital, capital,' reiterated his uncle Pascal. 'In spring, you see, the blood is active. But you are sound enough. By-the-bye, I saw your brother Octave at Marseilles last month. He is off to Paris, where he will get a fine berth in a high-class business. The young beggar, a nice life he leads.'

'What life?' innocently inquired the priest.

To avoid replying the doctor chirruped to his horse, and then went on: 'Briefly, everybody is well – your aunt Felicite, your uncle Rougon, and the others. Still, that does not hinder our needing your prayers. You are the saint of the family, my lad; I rely upon you to save the whole lot.'

He laughed, but in such a friendly, good-humoured way that Serge himself began to indulge in jocularity.

'You see,' continued Pascal, 'there are some among the lot whom it won't be easy to lead to Paradise. Some nice confessions you'd hear if all came in turn. For my part, I can do without their confessions; I watch them from a distance; I have got their records at home among my botanical specimens and medical notes. Some day I shall be able to draw up a wondrously interesting diagram. We shall see; we shall see!'

He was forgetting himself, carried away by his enthusiasm for science. A glance at his nephew's cassock pulled him up short.

'As for you, you're a parson,' he muttered; 'you did well; a parson's a very happy man. The calling absorbs you, eh? And so you've taken to the good path. Well! you would never have been satisfied otherwise. Your relatives, starting like you, have done a deal of evil, and still they are unsatisfied. It's all logically perfect, my lad. A priest completes the family. Besides, it was inevitable. Our blood was bound to run to that. So much the better for you; you have had the most luck.' Correcting himself, however, with a strange smile, he added: 'No, it's your sister Desiree who has had the best luck of all.'

He whistled, whipped up his horse, and changed the conversation. The gig, after climbing a somewhat steep slope, was threading its way through desolate ravines; at last it reached a tableland, where the hollow road skirted an interminable and lofty wall. Les Artaud had disappeared; they found themselves in the heart of a desert.

'We are getting near, are we not?' asked the priest.

'This is the Paradou,' replied the doctor, pointing to the wall. 'Haven't you been this way before, then? We are not three miles from Les Artaud. A splendid property it must have been, this Paradou. The park wall this side alone is quite a mile and a half long. But for over a hundred years it's all been running wild.'

'There are some fine trees,' observed the Abbe, as he looked up in astonishment at the luxuriant mass of foliage which jutted over.

'Yes, that part is very fertile. In fact, the park is a regular forest amidst the bare rocks which surround it. The Mascle, too, rises there; I have heard four or five springs mentioned, I fancy.'

In short sentences, interspersed with irrelevant digressions, he then related the story of the Paradou, according to the current legend of the countryside. In the time of Louis XV., a great lord had erected a magnificent palace there, with vast gardens, fountains, trickling streams, and statues – a miniature Versailles hidden away among the stones, under the full blaze of the southern sun. But he had there spent but one season with a lady of bewitching beauty, who doubtless died there, as none had ever seen her leave. Next year the mansion was destroyed by fire, the park doors were nailed up, the very loopholes of the walls were filled with mould; and thus, since that remote time, not a glance had penetrated that vast enclosure which covered the whole of one of the plateaux of the Garrigue hills.

'There can be no lack of nettles there,' laughingly said Abbe Mouret. 'Don't you find that the whole wall reeks of damp, uncle?'

A pause followed, and he asked:

'And whom does the Paradou belong to now?'

'Why, nobody knows,' the doctor answered. 'The owner did come here once, some twenty years ago. But he was so scared by the sight of this adders' nest that he has never turned up since. The real master is the caretaker, that old oddity, Jeanbernat, who has managed to find quarters in a lodge where the stones still hang together. There it is, see – that grey building yonder, with its windows all smothered in ivy.'

The gig passed by a lordly iron gate, ruddy with rust, and lined inside with a layer of boards. The wide dry throats were black with brambles. A hundred yards further on was the lodge inhabited by Jeanbernat. It stood within the park, which it overlooked. But the old keeper had apparently blocked up that side of his dwelling, and had cleared a little garden by the road. And there he lived, facing southwards, with his back turned upon the Paradou, as if unaware of the immensity of verdure that stretched away behind him.

The young priest jumped down, looking inquisitively around him and questioning the doctor, who was hurriedly fastening the horse to a ring fixed in the wall.

'And the old man lives all alone in this out-of-the-way hole?' he asked.

'Yes, quite alone,' replied his uncle, adding, however, the next minute: 'Well, he has with him a niece whom he had to take in, a queer girl, a regular savage. But we must make haste. The whole place looks death-like.'

VIII

The house with its shutters closed seemed wrapped in slumber as it stood there in the midday sun, amidst the hum of the big flies that swarmed all up the ivy to the roof tiles. The sunlit ruin was steeped in happy quietude. When the doctor had opened the gate of the narrow garden, which was enclosed by a lofty quickset hedge, there, in the shadow cast by a wall, they found Jeanbernat, tall and erect, and calmly smoking his pipe, as in the deep silence he watched his vegetables grow.

'What, are you up then, you humbug?' exclaimed the astonished doctor.

'So you were coming to bury me, were you?' growled the old man harshly. 'I don't want anybody. I bled myself.'

He stopped short as he caught sight of the priest, and assumed so threatening an expression that the doctor hastened to intervene.

'This is my nephew,' he said; 'the new Cure of Les Artaud – a good fellow, too. Devil take it, we haven't been bowling over the roads at this hour of the day to eat you, Jeanbernat.'

The old man calmed down a little.

'I don't want any shavelings here,' he grumbled. 'They're enough to make one croak. Mind, doctor, no priests, and no physics when I go off, or we shall quarrel. Let him come in, however, as he is your nephew.'

Abbe Mouret, struck dumb with amazement, could not speak a word. He stood there in the middle of the path scanning that strange solitaire, with scorched, brick-tinted face, and limbs all withered and twisted like a bundle of ropes, who seemed to bear the burden of his eighty years with a scornful contempt for life. When the doctor attempted to feel his pulse, his ill-humour broke out afresh.

'Do leave me in peace! I bled myself with my knife, I tell you. It's all over, now. Who was the fool of a peasant who disturbed you? The doctor here, and the priest as well, why not the mutes too! Well, it can't be helped, people will be fools. It won't prevent us from having a drink, eh?'

He fetched a bottle and three glasses, and stood them on an old table which he brought out into the shade. Then, having filled the glasses to the brim, he insisted on clinking them. His anger had given place to jeering cheerfulness.

'It won't poison you, Monsieur le Cure,' he said. 'A glass of good wine isn't a sin. Upon my word, however, this is the first time I ever clinked a glass with a cassock, but no offence to you. That poor Abbe Caffin, your predecessor, refused to argue with me. He was afraid.'

Jeanbernat gave vent to a hearty laugh, and then went on: 'Just fancy, he had pledged himself that he would prove to me that God exists. So, whenever I met him, I defied him to do it; and he sloped off crestfallen, I can tell you.'

'What, God does not exist!' cried Abbe Mouret, roused from his silence.

'Oh! just as you please,' mockingly replied Jeanbernat. 'We'll begin together all over again, if it's any pleasure to you. But I warn you that I'm a tough hand at it. There are some thousands of books in one of the rooms upstairs, which were rescued from the fire at the Paradou: all the philosophers of the eighteenth century, a whole heap of old books on religion. I've learned some fine things from them. I've been reading them these twenty years. Marry! you'll find you've got some one who can talk, Monsieur le Cure.'

He had risen, slowly waving his hand towards the surrounding horizon, to the earth and to the sky, and repeating solemnly: 'There's nothing, nothing, nothing. When the sun is snuffed out, all will be at an end.'

Doctor Pascal nudged Abbe Mouret with his elbow. With blinking eyes he was curiously observing the old man and nodding approvingly in order to induce him to talk. 'So you are a materialist, Jeanbernat?' he said.

'Oh, I am only a poor man,' replied the old fellow, relighting his pipe. 'When Count de Corbiere, whose foster-brother I was, died from a fall from his horse, his children sent me here to look after this park of the Sleeping Beauty, in order to get rid of me. I was sixty years old then, and I thought I was about done. But death forgot me; and I had to make myself a burrow. If one lives all alone, look you, one gets to see things in rather a queer fashion. The trees are no longer trees, the earth puts on the ways of a living being, the stones seem to tell you tales. A parcel of rubbish, eh? But I know some secrets that would fairly stagger you. Besides, what do you think there is to do in this devilish desert? I read the old books; it was more amusing than shooting. The Count, who used to curse like a heathen, was always saying to me: "Jeanbernat, my boy, I fully expect to meet you again in the hot place, so that you will be able to serve me there as you have up here.'"

Once more he waved his hand to the horizon and added: 'You hear, nothing; there's nothing. It's all foolery.'

Dr. Pascal began to laugh.

'A pleasant piece of foolery, at any rate,' he said. 'Jeanbernat, you are a deceiver. I suspect you are in love, in spite of your affectation of being *blase*. You were speaking very tenderly of the trees and stones just now.'

'Oh, no, I assure you,' murmured the old man, 'I have done with that. At one time, it's true, when I first knew you and used to go herborising with you, I was stupid enough to love all sorts of things I came across in that huge liar, the country. Fortunately, the old volumes have killed all that. I only wish my garden was smaller; I don't go out into the road twice a year. You see that bench? That's where I spend all my time, just watching my lettuces grow.'

'And what about your rounds in the park?' broke in the doctor.

'In the park!' repeated Jeanbernat, with a look of profound surprise. 'Why, it's more than twelve years since I set foot in it! What do you suppose I could do inside that cemetery? It's too big. It's stupid, what with those endless trees and moss everywhere and broken statues, and holes in which one might break one's neck at every step. The last time I went in there, it was so dark under the trees, there was such a stink of wild flowers, and such queer breezes blew along the paths, that I felt almost afraid. So I have shut myself up to prevent the park coming in here. A patch of sunlight, three feet of lettuce before me, and a big hedge shutting out all the view, why, that's more than enough for happiness. Nothing, that's what I'd like, nothing at all, something so tiny that nothing from outside could come to disturb me. Seven feet of earth, if you like, just to be able to croak on my back.'

He struck the table with his fist, and suddenly raised his voice to call out to Abbe Mouret: 'Come, just another glass, your reverence. The old gentleman isn't at the bottom of the bottle, you know.'

The priest felt ill at ease. To lead back to God that singular old man, whose reason seemed to him to be strangely disordered, appeared a task beyond his powers. He now remembered certain bits of gossip he had heard from La Teuse about the Philosopher, as the peasants of Les Artaud dubbed Jeanbernat. Scraps of scandalous stories vaguely floated in his memory. He rose, making a sign to the doctor that he wished to leave this house, where he seemed to inhale an odour of damnation. But, in spite of his covert fears, a strange feeling of curiosity made him linger. He simply walked to the end of the garden, throwing a searching glance into the vestibule, as if to see beyond it, behind the walls. All he could perceive, however, through the gaping doorway, was the black staircase. So he came back again, and sought for some hole, some glimpse of that sea of foliage which he knew was near by the mighty murmur that broke upon the house, like the sound of waves.

'And is the little one well?' asked the doctor, taking up his hat.

'Pretty well,' answered Jeanbernat. 'She's never here. She often disappears all day long – still, she may be in the upstair rooms.'

He raised his head and called: 'Albine! Albine!' Then with a shrug of his shoulders, he added: 'Yes, my word, she is a nice hussy… Well, till next time, Monsieur le Cure. I'm always at your disposal.'

Abbe Mouret, however, had no time to accept the Philosopher's challenge. A door suddenly opened at the end of the vestibule; a dazzling breach was made in the black darkness of the wall, and through the breach came a vision of a virgin forest, a great depth of woodland, beneath a flood of sunbeams. In that sudden blaze of light the priest distinctly perceived certain far-away things: a large yellow flower in the middle of a lawn, a sheet of water falling from a lofty rock, a colossal tree filled with a swarm of birds; and all this steeped, lost, blazing in such a tangle of greenery, such riotous luxuriance of vegetation, that the whole horizon seemed one great burst of shooting foliage. The door banged to, and everything vanished.

'Ah! the jade!' cried Jeanbernat, 'she was in the Paradou again!'

Albine was now laughing on the threshold of the vestibule. She wore an orange-coloured skirt, with a large red kerchief fastened round her waist, thus looking like some gipsy in holiday garb. And she went on laughing, her head thrown back, her bosom swelling with mirth, delighted with her flowers, wild flowers which she had plaited into her fair hair, fastened to her neck, her bodice, and her bare slender golden arms. She seemed like a huge nosegay, exhaling a powerful perfume.

'Ay, you are a beauty!' growled the old man. 'You smell of weeds enough to poison one – would any one think she was sixteen, that doll?'

Albine remained unabashed, however, and laughed still more heartily. Doctor Pascal, who was her great friend, let her kiss him.

'So you are not frightened in the Paradou?' he asked.

'Frightened? What of?' she said, her eyes wide open with astonishment. 'The walls are too high, no one can get in. There's only myself. It is my garden, all my very own. A fine big one, too. I haven't found out where it ends yet.'

'And the animals?' interrupted the doctor.

'The animals? Oh! they don't hurt; they all know me well.'

'But it is very dark under the trees?'

'Course! there's shade: if there were none, the sun would burn my face up. It is very pleasant in the shade among the leaves.'

She flitted about, filling the little garden with the rustling sweep of her skirts, and scattering round the pungent odour of wild flowers which clung to her. She had smiled at Abbe Mouret without trace of shyness, without heed of the astonished look with which he observed her. The priest had stepped aside. That fair-haired maid, with long oval face, glowing with life, seemed to him to be the weird mysterious offspring of the forest of which he had caught a glimpse in a sheet of sunlight.

'I say, I have got some blackbird nestlings; would you like them?' Albine asked the doctor.

'No, thanks,' he answered, laughing. 'You should give them to the Cure's sister; she is very fond of pets. Good day, Jeanbernat.'

Albine, however, had fastened on the priest.

'You are the vicar of Les Artaud, aren't you? You have a sister? I'll go and see her. Only you must not speak to me about God. My uncle will not have it.'

'You bother us, be off,' exclaimed Jeanbernat, shrugging his shoulders. Then bounding away like a goat, dropping a shower of flowers behind her, she disappeared. The slam of a door was heard, and from behind the house came bursts of laughter, which died away in the distance like the scampering rush of some mad animal let loose among the grass.

'You'll see, she will end by sleeping in the Paradou,' muttered the old man with indifference.

And as he saw his visitors off, he added: 'If you should find me dead one of these fine days, doctor, just do me the favour of pitching me into the muck-pit there, behind my lettuces. Good evening, gentlemen.'

He let the wooden gate which closed the hedge fall to again, and the house assumed once more its aspect of happy peacefulness in the noonday sunlight, amidst the buzzing of the big flies that swarmed all up the ivy even to the roof tiles.

IX

The gig once more rolled along the road skirting the Paradou's interminable wall. Abbe Mouret, still silent, scanned with upturned eyes the huge boughs which stretched over that wall, like the arms of giants hidden there. All sorts of sounds came from the park: rustling of wings, quivering of leaves, furtive bounds at which branches snapped, mighty sighs that bowed the young shoots – a vast breath of life sweeping over the crests of a nation of trees. At times, as he heard a birdlike note that seemed like a human laugh, the priest turned his head, as if he felt uneasy.

'A queer girl!' said his uncle as he eased the reins a little. 'She was nine years old when she took up her quarters with that old heathen. Some brother of his had ruined himself, though in what I can't remember. The little one was at school somewhere when her father killed himself. She was even quite a little lady, up to reading, embroidery, chattering, and strumming on the piano. And such a coquette too! I saw her arrive with open-worked stockings, embroidered skirts, frills, cuffs, a heap of finery. Ah, well! the finery didn't last long!'

He laughed. A big stone nearly upset the gig.

'It will be lucky if I don't leave a wheel in this cursed road!' he muttered. 'Hold on, my boy.'

The wall still stretched beside them: the priest still listened.

'As you may well imagine,' continued the doctor, 'the Paradou, what with its sun, its stones, and its thistles, would wreck a whole outfit every day. Three or four mouthfuls, that's all it made of all the little one's beautiful dresses. She used to come back naked. Now she dresses like a savage. To-day she was rather presentable; but sometimes she has scarcely anything on beyond her shoes and chemise. Did you hear her? The Paradou is hers. The very day after she came she took possession of it. She lives in it; jumps out of the window when Jeanbernat locks the door, bolts off in spite of all, goes nobody knows whither, buries herself in some invisible burrows known only to herself. She must have a fine time in that wilderness.'

'Hark, uncle!' interrupted Abbe Mouret. 'Isn't that some animal running behind the wall?'

Uncle Pascal listened.

'No,' he said after a minute's silence, 'it is the rattle of the trap on the stones. No, the child doesn't play the piano now. I believe she has even forgotten how to read. Just picture to yourself a young lady gone back to a state of primevalness, turned out to play on a desert island. My word, if ever you get to know of a girl who needs proper bringing up, I advise you not to entrust her to Jeanbernat. He has a most primitive way of letting nature alone. When I ventured to speak to him about Albine he answered me that he must not prevent trees from growing as they pleased. He says he is for the normal development of temperaments… All the same, they are very interesting, both of them. I never come this way without paying them a visit.'

The gig was now emerging from the hollowed road. At this point the wall of the Paradou turned and wound along the crest of the hills as far as one could see. As Abbe Mouret turned to take a last look at that grey-hued barrier, whose impenetrable austerity had at last begun to annoy him, a rustling of shaken boughs was heard and a clump of young birch trees seemed to bow in greeting from above the wall.

'I knew some animal was running behind,' said the priest.

But, although nobody could be seen, though nothing was visible in the air above save the birches rocking more and more violently, they heard a clear, laughing voice call out: 'Good-bye, doctor! good-bye, Monsieur le Cure! I am kissing the tree, and the tree is sending you my kisses.'

'Why! it is Albine,' exclaimed Doctor Pascal. 'She must have followed the trap at a run. Jumping over bushes is mere play to her, the little elf!'

And he in his turn shouted out:

'Good-bye, my pet! How tall you must be to bow like that.'

The laughter grew louder, the birches bowed still lower, scattering their leaves around even on the hood of the gig.

'I am as tall as the trees; all the leaves that fall are kisses,' replied the voice now mellowed by distance, so musical, so merged into the rippling whispers of the park, that the young priest was thrilled.

The road grew better. On coming down the slope Les Artaud reappeared in the midst of the scorched plain. When the gig reached the turning to the village, Abbe Mouret would not let his uncle drive him back to the vicarage. He jumped down, saying:

'No, thanks, I prefer to walk: it will do me good.'

'Well, just as you like,' at last answered the doctor. And with a clasp of the hand, he added: 'Well, if you only had such parishioners as that old brute Jeanbernat, you wouldn't often be disturbed. However, you yourself wanted to come. And mind you keep well. At the slightest ache, night or day, send for me. You know I attend all the family gratis… There, good-bye, my boy.'

X

Abbe Mouret felt more at ease when he found himself again alone, walking along the dusty road. The stony fields brought him back to his dream of austerity, of an inner life spent in a desert. From the trees all along the sunken road disturbing moisture had fallen on his neck, which now the burning sun was drying. The sight of the lean almond trees, the scanty corn crops, the weak vines, on either side of the way, soothed him, delivered him from the perturbation into which the lusty atmosphere of the Paradou had thrown him. Amid the blinding glare that flowed from heaven over the bare land, Jeanbernat's blasphemies no longer cast even a shadow. A thrill of pleasure ran through the priest as he raised his head and caught sight of the solitaire's motionless bar-like silhouette and the pink patch of tiles on the church.

But, as he walked on, fresh anxiety beset the Abbe. La Teuse would give him a fine reception; for his luncheon must have been waiting nearly two hours for him. He pictured her terrible face, the flood of words with which she would greet him, the angry clatter of kitchen ware which he would hear the whole afternoon. When he had got through Les Artaud, his fear became so lively that he hesitated, full of trepidation, and wondered if it would not be better to go round and reach the parsonage by way of the church. But, while he deliberated, La Teuse herself appeared on the doorstep of the parsonage, her cap all awry, and her hands on her hips. With drooping head he had perforce to climb the slope under her storm-laden gaze, which he could feel weighing upon his shoulders.

'I believe I am rather late, my good Teuse,' he stammered, as he turned the path's last bend.

La Teuse waited till he stood quite close before her. She then gave him a furious glance, and, without a word, turned and stalked before him into the dining-room, banging her big heels upon the floor-tiles and so rigid with ire that she hardly limped at all.

'I have had so many things to do,' began the priest, scared by this dumb reception. 'I have been running about all the morning.'

But she cut him short with another look, so fixed, so full of anger, that he felt his legs give way under him. He sat down, and began to eat. She waited on him in the sharp, mechanical manner of an automaton, all but breaking the plates with the violence with which she set them down. The silence became so awful that, choking with emotion, he was unable to swallow his third mouthful.

'My sister has had her luncheon?' he asked. 'Quite right of her. Luncheon should always be served whenever I am kept out.'

No answer came. La Teuse stood there waiting to remove his plate as soon as he should have emptied it. Thereupon, feeling that he could not possibly eat with those implacable eyes crushing him, he pushed his plate away. This angry gesture acted on La Teuse like a whip stroke, rousing her from her obstinate stiffness. She fairly jumped.

'Ah! that's how it is!' she exclaimed. 'There you are again, losing your temper! Very well, I am off; you can pay my fare, so that I may go back home. I have had enough of Les Artaud, and your church, and everything else!'

She took off her apron with trembling hands.

'You must have seen that I didn't wish to say anything to you. A nice life, indeed! Only mountebanks do such things, Monsieur le Cure! This is eleven o'clock, ain't it! Aren't you ashamed of sitting at table when it's almost two o'clock? It's not like a Christian, no, it is not like a Christian!'

And, taking her stand before him, she went on: 'Well, where do you come from? whom have you seen? what business can have kept you? If only you were a child you would have the whip. It isn't the place for a priest to be, on the roads in the blazing sun like a tramp without a roof to put over his head. A fine state you are in, with your shoes all white and your cassock smothered in dust! Who will brush your cassock for you? Who will buy you another one? Speak out, will you; tell me what you have been doing! My word! if everybody didn't know you, they would end by thinking queer

things about you. And shall I tell you? Why, I won't say but what you may have been up to something wrong. When folks lunch at such hours they are capable of anything!'

Abbe Mouret let the storm blow over him. At the old servant's wrathful words he experienced a kind of relief.

'Come, my good Teuse,' he said, 'you will first put your apron on again.'

'No, no,' she cried, 'it's all over, I am going.'

But he got up and, laughing, tied her apron round her waist. She struggled against him and stuttered: 'I tell you no! You are a wheedler. I can see through your game, I see you want to come it over me with your honeyed words. Where did you go? We'll see afterwards.'

He gaily sat down to table again like a man who has gained a victory.

'First, I must be allowed to eat. I am dying with hunger,' said he.

'No doubt,' she murmured, her pity moved. 'Is there any common sense in it? Would you like me to fry you a couple of eggs? It would not take long. Well, if you have enough. But everything is cold! And I had taken such pains with your aubergines! Nice they are now! They look like old shoe-leather. Luckily you haven't got a tender tooth like poor Monsieur Caffin. Yes, you have some good points, I don't deny it.'

Thus chattering, she waited on him with all a mother's care. After he had finished she ran to the kitchen to see if the coffee was still warm. She frisked about and limped most outrageously in her delight at having made things up with him. As a rule Abbe Mouret fought shy of coffee, which always upset his nervous system; but on this occasion, to ratify the conclusion of peace, he took the cup she brought him. And as he lingered at table she sat down opposite him and repeated gently, like a woman tortured by curiosity:

'Where have you been, Monsieur le Cure?'

'Well,' he answered with a smile, 'I have seen the Brichets, I have spoken to Bambousse.'

Thereupon he had to relate to her what the Brichets had said, what Bambousse had decided, and how they looked, and where they were at work. When he repeated to her the answer of Rosalie's father, 'Of course!' she exclaimed, 'if the child should die her mishap would go for nothing.' And clasping her hands with a look of envious admiration she added, 'How you must have chattered, your reverence! More than half the day spent to obtain such a fine result! You took it easy coming home? It must have been very hot on the road?'

The Abbe, who by this time had risen, made no answer. He had been on the point of speaking about the Paradou, and asking for some information concerning it. But a fear of being flooded with eager questions, and a kind of vague unavowed shame, made him keep silence respecting his visit to Jeanbernat. He cut all further questions short by asking:

'Where is my sister? I don't hear her.'

'Come along, sir,' said La Teuse, beginning to laugh, and raising her finger to her lips.

They went into the next room, a country drawing-room, hung with faded wall-paper showing large grey flowers, and furnished with four armchairs and a sofa, covered with horse-hair. On the sofa now slept Desiree, stretched out at full length, with her head resting on her clenched hands. The pronounced curve of her bosom was raised somewhat by her upstretched arms, bare to the elbows. She was breathing somewhat heavily, her red lips parted, and thus showing her teeth.

'Lord! isn't she sleeping sound!' whispered La Teuse. 'She didn't even hear you pitching into me just now. Well, she must be precious tired. Just fancy, she was cleaning up her yard till nearly noon. And when she had eaten something, she came and dropped down there like a shot. She has not stirred since.'

For a moment the priest gazed lovingly at her. 'We must let her have as much rest as she wants,' he said.

‘Of course. Isn’t it a pity she’s such an innocent? Just look at those big arms! Whenever I dress her I always think what a fine woman she would have made. Ay, she would have brought you some splendid nephews, sir. Don’t you think she is like that stone lady in Plassans corn-market?’

She spoke thus of a Cybele stretched upon sheaves of wheat, the work of one of Puget’s pupils, which was carved on the frontal of the market building. Without replying, however, Abbe Mouret gently pushed her out of the room, and begged her to make as little noise as possible. Till evening, therefore, perfect silence settled on the parsonage. La Teuse finished her washing in the shed. The priest, seated at the bottom of the little garden, his breviary fallen on his lap, remained absorbed in pious thoughts, while all around him rosy petals rained from the blossoming peach-trees.

XI

About six o'clock there came a sudden wakening. A noise of doors opening and closing, accompanied by bursts of laughter, shook the whole house. Desiree appeared, her hair all down and her arms still half bare.

'Serge! Serge!' she called.

And catching sight of her brother in the garden, she ran up to him and sat down for a minute on the ground at his feet, begging him to follow her:

'Do come and see the animals! You haven't seen the animals yet, have you? If you only knew how beautiful they are now!'

She had to beg very hard, for the yard rather scared him. But when he saw tears in Desiree's eyes, he yielded. She threw herself on his neck in a sudden puppy-like burst of glee, laughing more than ever, without attempting to dry her cheeks.

'Oh! how nice you are!' she stammered, as she dragged him off. 'You shall see the hens, the rabbits, the pigeons, and my ducks which have got fresh water, and my goat, whose room is as clean as mine now. I have three geese and two turkeys, you know. Come quick. You shall see all.'

Desiree was then twenty-two years old. Reared in the country by her nurse, a peasant woman of Saint-Eutrope, she had grown up anyhow. Her brain void of all serious thoughts, she had thriven on the fat soil and open air of the country, developing physically but never mentally, growing into a lovely animal – white, with rosy blood and firm skin. She was not unlike a high-bred donkey endowed with the power of laughter. Although she dabbled about from morning till night, her delicate hands and feet, the supple outlines of her hips, the bourgeois refinement of her maiden form remained unimpaired; so that she was in truth a creature apart – neither lady nor peasant – but a girl nourished by the soil, with the broad shoulders and narrow brow of a youthful goddess.

Doubtless it was by reason of her weak intellect that she was drawn towards animals. She was never happy save with them; she understood their language far better than that of mankind, and looked after them with motherly affection. Her reasoning powers were deficient, but in lieu thereof she had an instinct which put her on a footing of intelligence with them. At their very first cry of pain she knew what ailed them; she would choose dainties upon which they would pounce greedily. A single gesture from her quelled their squabbles. She seemed to know their good or their evil character at a glance; and related such long tales about the tiniest chick, with such an abundance and minuteness of detail, as to astound those to whom one chicken was exactly like any other. Her farmyard had thus become a country, as it were, over which she reigned; a country complex in its organisation, disturbed by rebellions, peopled by the most diverse creatures whose records were known to her alone. So accurate was her instinct that she detected the unfertile eggs in a sitting, and foretold the number of a litter of rabbits.

When, at sixteen, Desiree became a young woman, she retained all her wonted health; and rapidly developed, with round, free-swaying bust, broad hips like those of an antique statue, the full growth indeed of a vigorous animal. One might have thought that she had sprung from the rich soil of her poultry-yard, that she absorbed the sap with her sturdy legs, which were as firm as young trees. And nought disturbed her amidst all this plenitude. She found continuous satisfaction in being surrounded by birds and animals which ever increased and multiplied, their fruitfulness filling her with delight. Nothing could have been healthier. She innocently feasted on the odour and warmth of life, knowing no depraved curiosity, but retaining all the tranquillity of a beautiful animal, simply happy at seeing her little world thus multiply, feeling as if she thereby became a mother, the common natural mother of one and all.

Since she had been living at Les Artaud, she had spent her days in complete beatitude. At last she was satisfying the dream of her life, the only desire which had worried her amidst her weak-

minded puerility. She had a poultry-yard, a nook all to herself, where she could breed animals to her heart's content. And she almost lived there, building rabbit-hutches with her own hands, digging out a pond for the ducks, knocking in nails, fetching straw, allowing no one to assist her. All that La Teuse had to do was to wash her afterwards. The poultry-yard was situated behind the cemetery; and Desiree often had to jump the wall, and run hither and thither among the graves after some fowl whom curiosity had led astray. Right at the end was a shed giving accommodation to the fowls and the rabbits; to the right was a little stable for the goat. Moreover, all the animals lived together; the rabbits ran about with the fowls, the nanny-goat would take a footbath in the midst of the ducks; the geese, the turkeys, the guinea-fowls, and the pigeons all fraternised in the company of three cats. Whenever Desiree appeared at the wooden fence which prevented her charges from making their way into the church, a deafening uproar greeted her.

'Eh! can't you hear them?' she said to her brother, as they reached the dining-room door.

But, when she had admitted him and closed the gate behind them, she was assailed so violently that she almost disappeared. The ducks and the geese, opening and shutting their beaks, tugged at her skirts; the greedy hens sprang up and pecked her hands; the rabbits squatted on her feet and then bounded up to her knees; whilst the three cats leapt upon her shoulders, and the goat bleated in its stable at being unable to reach her.

'Leave me alone, do! all you creatures!' she cried with a hearty sonorous laugh, feeling tickled by all the feathers, claws, and beaks and paws rubbing against her.

However, she did not attempt to free herself. As she often said, she would have let herself be devoured; it seemed so sweet to feel all this life cling to her and encompass her with the warmth of eider-down. At last only one cat persisted in remaining on her back.

'It's Moumou,' she said. 'His paws are like velvet.' Then, calling her brother's attention to the yard, she proudly added: 'See, how clean it is!'

The yard had indeed been swept out, washed, and raked over. But the disturbed water and the forked-up litter exhaled so fetid and powerful an odour that Abbe Mouret half choked. The dung was heaped against the graveyard wall in a huge smoking mound.

'What a pile, eh?' continued Desiree, leading her brother into the pungent vapour, 'I put it all there myself, nobody helped me. Go on, it isn't dirty. It cleans. Look at my arms.'

As she spoke she held out her arms, which she had merely dipped into a pail of water – regal arms they were, superbly rounded, blooming like full white roses amidst the manure.

'Yes, yes,' gently said the priest, 'you have worked hard. It's very nice now.'

Then he turned towards the wicket, but she stopped him.

'Do wait a bit. You shall see them all. You have no idea – ' And so saying, she dragged him to the rabbit house under the shed.

'There are young ones in all the hutches,' she said, clapping her hands in glee.

Then at great length she proceeded to explain to him all about the litters. He had to crouch down and come close to the wire netting, whilst she gave him minute details. The mother does, with big restless ears, eyed him askance, panting and motionless with fear. Then, in one hutch, he saw a hairy cavity wherein crawled a living heap, an indistinct dusky mass heaving like a single body. Close by some young ones, with enormous heads, ventured to the edge of the hole. A little farther were yet stronger ones, who looked like young rats, ferreting and leaping about with their raised rumps showing their white scuts. Others, white ones with pale ruby eyes, and black ones with jet eyes, galloped round their hutches with playful grace. Now a scare would make them bolt off swiftly, revealing at every leap their slender reddened paws. Next they would squat down all in a heap, so closely packed that their heads could no longer be seen.

'It is you they are frightened at,' Desiree kept on saying. 'They know me well.'

She called them and drew some bread-crust from her pocket. The little rabbits then became more confident, and, with puckered noses, kept sidling up, and rearing against the netting one by

one. She kept them like that for a minute to show her brother the rosy down upon their bellies, and then gave her crust to the boldest one. Upon this the whole of them flocked up, sliding forward and squeezing one another, but never quarreling. At one moment three little ones were all nibbling the same piece of crust, but others darted away, turning to the wall so as to eat in peace, while their mothers in the rear remained snuffing distrustfully and refused the crusts.

'Oh! the greedy little things!' exclaimed Desiree. 'They would eat like that till to-morrow morning! At night, even, you can bear them crunching the leaves they have overlooked in the day-time.'

The priest had risen as if to depart, but she never wearied of smiling on her dear little ones.

'You see the big one there, that's all white, with black ears – Well! he dotes on poppies. He is very clever at picking them out from the other weeds. The other day he got the colic. So I took him and kept him warm in my pocket. Since then he has been quite frisky.'

She poked her fingers through the wire netting and stroked the rabbits' backs.

'Wouldn't you say it was satin?' she continued. 'They are dressed like princes. And ain't they coquettish! Look, there's one who is always cleaning himself. He wears the fur off his paws… If only you knew how funny they are! I say nothing, but I see all their little games. That grey one looking at us, for instance, used to hate a little doe, which I had to put somewhere else. There were terrible scenes between them. It would take too long to tell you all, but the last time he gave her a drubbing, when I came up in a rage, what do you think I saw? Why that rascal huddled up at the back there as if he was just at his last gasp. He wanted to make me believe that it was he who had to complain of her.'

Then Desiree paused to apostrophise the rabbit. 'Yes, you may listen to me; you're a rogue!' And turning towards her brother, 'He understands all I say,' she added softly, with a wink.

But Abbe Mouret could stand it no longer. He was perturbed by the heat that emanated from the litters, the life that crawled under the hair plucked from the does' bellies, exhaling powerful emanations. On the other hand, Desiree, as if slowly intoxicated, was growing brighter and pinker.

'But there's nothing to take you away!' she cried; 'you always seem anxious to go off. You must see my little chicks! They were born last night.'

She took some rice and threw a handful before her. The hen gravely drew near, clucking to the little band of chickens that followed her chirping and scampering as if in bewilderment. When they were fairly in the middle of the scattered rice the hen eagerly pecked at it, and threw down the grains she cracked, while her little ones hastily began to feed. All the charm of infancy was theirs. Half-naked as it were, with round heads, eyes sparkling like steel needles, beaks so queerly set, and down so quaintly ruffled up, they looked like penny toys. Desiree laughed with enjoyment at sight of them.

'What little loves they are!' she stammered.

She took up two of them, one in each hand, and smothered them with eager kisses. And then the priest had to inspect them all over, while she coolly said to him:

'It isn't easy to tell the cocks. But I never make a mistake. This one is a hen, and this one is a hen too.'

Then she set them on the ground again. Other hens were now coming up to eat the rice. A large ruddy cock with flaming plumage followed them, lifting his large feet with majestic caution.

'Alexander is getting splendid,' said the Abbe, to please his sister.

Alexander was the cock's name. He looked up at the young girl with his fiery eye, his head turned round, his tail outspread, and then installed himself close by her skirts.

'He is very fond of me,' she said. 'Only I can touch him. He is a good bird. There are fourteen hens, and never do I find a bad egg in the nests. Do I, Alexander?'

She stooped; the bird did not fly from her caress. A rush of blood seemed to set his comb aflame; flapping his wings, and stretching out his neck, he burst into a long crow which rang out like a blast from a brazen throat. Four times did he repeat his crow while all the cocks of Les Artaud answered in the distance. Desiree was greatly amused by her brother's startled looks.

'He deafens one, eh?' she said. 'He has a splendid voice. But he's not vicious, I assure you, though the hens are – You remember the big speckled one, that used to lay yellow eggs? Well, the day before yesterday she hurt her foot. When the others saw the blood they went quite mad. They all followed her, pecking at her and drinking her blood, so that by the evening they had eaten up her foot. I found her with her head behind a stone, like an idiot, saying nothing, and letting herself be devoured.'

The remembrance of the fowls' voracity made her laugh. She calmly related other cruelties of theirs: young chickens devoured, of which she had only found the necks and wings, and a litter of kittens eaten up in the stable in a few hours.

'You might give them a human being,' she continued, 'they'd finish him. And aren't they tough livers! They get on with a broken limb even. They may have wounds, big holes in their bodies, and still they'll gobble their victuals. That's what I like them for; their flesh grows again in two days; they are always as warm as if they had a store of sunshine under their feathers. When I want to give them a treat, I cut them up some raw meat. And worms too! Wait, you'll see how they love them.'

She ran to the dungheap, and unhesitatingly picked up a worm she found there. The fowls darted at her hands; but to amuse herself with the sight of their greediness she held the worm high above them. At last she opened her fingers, and forthwith the fowls hustled one another and pounced upon the worm. One of them fled with it in her beak, pursued by the others; it was thus taken, snatched away, and retaken many times until one hen, with a mighty gulp, swallowed it altogether. At that they all stopped short with heads thrown back, and eyes on the alert for another worm. Desiree called them by their names, and talked pettingly to them; while Abbe Mouret retreated a few steps from this display of voracious life.

'No, I am not at all comfortable,' he said to his sister, when she tried to make him feel the weight of a fowl she was fattening. 'It always makes me uneasy to touch live animals.'

He tried to smile, but Desiree taxed him with cowardice.

'Ah well, what about my ducks, and geese, and turkeys?' said she. 'What would you do if you had all those to look after? Ducks are dirty, if you like. Do you hear them shaking their bills in the water? And when they dive, you can only see their tails sticking straight up like ninepins. Geese and turkeys, too, are not easy to manage. Isn't it fun to see them walking along with their long necks, some quite white and others quite black? They look like ladies and gentlemen. And I wouldn't advise you to trust your finger to them. They would swallow it at a gulp. But my fingers, they only kiss – see!'

Her words were cut short by a joyous bleat from the goat, which had at last forced the door of the stable open. Two bounds and the animal was close to her, bending its forelegs, and affectionately rubbing its horns against her. To the priest, with its pointed beard and obliquely set eyes, it seemed to wear a diabolical grin. But Desiree caught it round the neck, kissed its head, played and ran with it, and talked about how she liked to drink its milk. She often did so, she said, when she was thirsty in the stable.

'See, it has plenty of milk,' she added, pointing to the animal's udder.

The priest lowered his eyes. He could remember having once seen in the cloister of Saint-Saturnin at Plassans a horrible stone gargoyle, representing a goat and a monk; and ever since he had always looked on goats as dissolute creatures of hell. His sister had only been allowed to get one after weeks of begging. For his part, whenever he came to the yard, he shunned all contact with the animal's long silky coat, and carefully guarded his cassock from the touch of its horns.

'All right, I'll let you go now,' said Desiree, becoming aware of his growing discomfort. 'But you must just let me show you something else first. Promise not to scold me, won't you? I have not said anything to you about it, because you wouldn't have allowed it… But if you only knew how pleased I am!'

As she spoke she put on an entreating expression, clasped her hands, and laid her head upon her brother's shoulder.

'Another piece of folly, no doubt,' he murmured, unable to refrain from smiling.

'You won't mind, will you?' she continued, her eyes glistening with delight. 'You won't be angry? – He is so pretty!'

Thereupon she ran to open the low door under the shed, and forthwith a little pig bounded into the middle of the yard.

'Oh! isn't he a cherub?' she exclaimed with a look of profound rapture as she saw him leap out.

The little pig was indeed charming, quite pink, his snout washed clean by the greasy slops placed before him, though incessant routing in his trough had left a ring of dirt about his eyes. He trotted about, hustled the fowls, rushing to gobble up whatever was thrown them, and upsetting the little yard with his sudden turns and twists. His ears flapped over his eyes, his snout went snorting over the ground, and with his slender feet he resembled a toy animal on wheels. From behind, his tail looked like a bit of string that served to hang him up by.

'I won't have this beast here!' exclaimed the priest, terribly put out.

'Oh, Serge, dear old Serge,' begged Desiree again, 'don't be so unkind. See, what a harmless little thing he is! I'll wash him, I'll keep him very clean. La Teuse went and had him given her for me. We can't send him back now. See, he is looking at you; he wants to smell you. Don't be afraid, he won't eat you.'

But she broke off, seized with irresistible laughter. The little pig had blundered in a dazed fashion between the goat's legs, and tripped her up. And he was now madly careering round, squeaking, rolling, scaring all the denizens of the poultry-yard. To quiet him Desiree had to get him an earthen pan full of dish-water. In this he wallowed up to his ears, splashing and grunting, while quick quivers of delight coursed over his rosy skin. And now his uncurled tail hung limply down.

The stirring of this foul water put a crowning touch to Abbe Mouret's disgust. Ever since he had been there, he had choked more and more; his hands and chest and face were afire, and he felt quite giddy. The odour of the fowls and rabbits, the goat, and the pig, all mingled in one pestilential stench. The atmosphere, laden with the ferments of life, was too heavy for his maiden shoulders. And it seemed to him that Desiree had grown taller, expanding at the hips, waving huge arms, sweeping the ground with her skirts, and stirring up all that powerful odour which overpowered him. He had only just time to open the wicket. His feet clung to the stone flags still dank with manure, in such wise that it seemed as if he were held there by some clasp of the soil. And suddenly, despite himself, there came back to him a memory of the Paradou, with its huge trees, its black shadows, its penetrating perfumes.

'There, you are quite red now,' Desiree said to him as she joined him outside the wicket. 'Aren't you pleased to have seen everything? Do you hear the noise they are making?'

On seeing her depart, the birds and animals had thrown themselves against the trellis work emitting piteous cries. The little pig, especially, gave vent to prolonged whines that suggested the sharpening of a saw. Desiree, however, curtsied to them and kissed her finger-tips to them, laughing at seeing them all huddled together there, like so many lovers of hers. Then, hugging her brother, as she accompanied him to the garden, she whispered into his ear with a blush: 'I should so like a cow.'

He looked at her, with a ready gesture of disapproval.

'No, no, not now,' she hurriedly went on. 'We'll talk about it again later on – But there would be room in the stable. A lovely white cow with red spots. You'd soon see what nice milk we should have. A goat becomes too little in the end. And when the cow has a calf!'

At the mere thought of this she skipped and clapped her hands with glee; and to the priest she seemed to have brought the poultry-yard away with her in her skirts. So he left her at the end of the garden, sitting in the sunlight on the ground before a hive, whence the bees buzzed like golden berries round her neck, along her bare arms and in her hair, without thought of stinging her.

XII

Brother Archangias dined at the parsonage every Thursday. As a rule he came early so as to talk over parish matters. It was he who, for the last three months, had kept the Abbe informed of all the affairs of the valley. That Thursday, while waiting till La Teuse should call them, they strolled about in front of the church. The priest, on relating his interview with Bambousse, was surprised to find that the Brother thought the peasant's reply quite natural.

'The man's right,' said the Ignorantin.[4] 'You don't give away chattels like that. Rosalie is no great bargain, but it's always hard to see your own daughter throw herself away on a pauper.'

'Still,' rejoined Abbe Mouret, 'a marriage is the only way of stopping the scandal.'

The Brother shrugged his big shoulders and laughed aggravatingly. 'Do you think you'll cure the neighbourhood with that marriage?' he exclaimed. 'Before another two years Catherine will be following her sister's example. They all go the same way, and as they end by marrying, they snap their fingers at every one. These Artauds flourish in it all, as on a congenial dungheap. There is only one possible remedy, as I have told you before: wring all the girls' necks if you don't want the country to be poisoned. No husbands, Monsieur le Cure, but a good thick stick!'

Then calming down a bit, he added: 'Let every one do with their own as they think best.'

He went on to speak about fixing the hours for the catechism classes; but Abbe Mouret replied in an absent-minded way, his eyes dwelling on the village at his feet in the setting sun. The peasants were wending their way homewards, silently and slowly, with the dragging steps of wearied oxen returning to their sheds. Before the tumble-down houses stood women calling to one another, carrying on bawling conversations from door to door, while bands of children filled the roadway with the riot of their big clumsy shoes, grovelling and rolling and pushing each other about. A bestial odour ascended from that heap of tottering houses, and the priest once more fancied himself in Desiree's poultry-yard, where life ever increased and multiplied. Here, too, was the same incessant travail, which so disturbed him. Since morning his mind had been running on that episode of Rosalie and Fortune, and now his thoughts returned to it, to the foul features of existence, the incessant, fated task of Nature, which sowed men broadcast like grains of wheat. The Artauds were a herd penned in between four ranges of hills, increasing, multiplying, spreading more and more thickly over the land with each successive generation.

'See,' cried Brother Archangias, interrupting his discourse to point to a tall girl who was letting her sweetheart snatch a kiss, 'there is another hussy over there!'

He shook his long black arms at the couple and made them flee. In the distance, over the crimson fields and the peeling rocks, the sun was dying in one last flare. Night gradually came on. The warm fragrance of the lavender became cooler on the wings of the light evening breeze which now arose. From time to time a deep sigh fell on the ear as if that fearful land, consumed by ardent passions, had at length grown calm under the soft grey rain of twilight. Abbe Mouret, hat in hand, delighted with the coolness, once more felt quietude descend upon him.

'Monsieur le Cure! Brother Archangias!' cried La Teuse. 'Come quick! The soup is on the table.'

It was cabbage soup, and its odoriferous steam filled the parsonage dining-room. The Brother seated himself and fell to, slowly emptying the huge plate that La Teuse had put down before him. He was a big eater, and clucked his tongue as each mouthful descended audibly into his stomach. Keeping his eyes on his spoon, he did not speak a word.

'Isn't my soup good, then, Monsieur le Cure?' the old servant asked the priest. 'You are only fiddling with your plate.'

'I am not a bit hungry, my good Teuse,' Serge replied, smiling.

[4] A popular name in France for a Christian Brother. – ED.

'Well! how can one wonder at it when you go on as you do! But you would have been hungry, if you hadn't lunched at past two o'clock.'

Brother Archangias, tilting into his spoon the last few drops of soup remaining in his plate, said gravely: 'You should be regular in your meals, Monsieur le Cure.'

At this moment Desiree, who also had finished her soup, sedately and in silence, rose and followed La Teuse to the kitchen. The Brother, then left alone with Abbe Mouret, cut himself some long strips of bread, which he ate while waiting for the next dish.

'So you made a long round to-day?' he asked the priest. But before the other could reply a noise of footsteps, exclamations, and ringing laughter, arose at the end of the passage, in the direction of the yard. A short altercation apparently took place. A flute-like voice which disturbed the Abbe rose in vexed and hurried accents, which finally died away in a burst of glee.

'What can it be?' said Serge, rising from his chair.

But Desiree bounded in again, carrying something hidden in her gathered-up skirt. And she burst out excitedly: 'Isn't she queer? She wouldn't come in at all. I caught hold of her dress; but she is awfully strong; she soon got away from me.'

'Whom on earth is she talking about?' asked La Teuse, running in from the kitchen with a dish of potatoes, across which lay a piece of bacon.

The girl sat down, and with the greatest caution drew from her skirt a blackbird's nest in which three wee fledglings were slumbering. She laid it on her plate. The moment the little birds felt the light, they stretched out their feeble necks and opened their crimson beaks to ask for food. Desiree clapped her hands, enchanted, seized with strange emotion at the sight of these hitherto unknown creatures.

'It's that Paradou girl!' exclaimed the Abbe suddenly, remembering everything.

La Teuse had gone to the window. 'So it is,' she said. 'I might have known that grasshopper's voice – Oh! the gipsy! Look, she's stopped there to spy on us.'

Abbe Mouret drew near. He, too, thought that he could see Albine's orange-coloured skirt behind a juniper bush. But Brother Archangias, in a towering passion, raised himself on tiptoe behind him, and, stretching out his fist and wagging his churlish head, thundered forth: 'May the devil take you, you brigand's daughter! I will drag you right round the church by your hair if ever I catch you coming and casting your evil spells here!'

A peal of laughter, fresh as the breath of night, rang out from the path, followed by light hasty footsteps and the swish of a dress rustling through the grass like an adder. Abbe Mouret, standing at the window, saw something golden glide through the pine trees like a moonbeam. The breeze, wafted in from the open country, was now laden with that penetrating perfume of verdure, that scent of wildflowers, which Albine had scattered from her bare arms, unfettered bosom, and streaming tresses at the Paradou.

'An accursed soul! a child of perdition!' growled Brother Archangias, as he reseated himself at the dinner table. He fell greedily upon his bacon, and swallowed his potatoes whole instead of bread. La Teuse, however, could not persuade Desiree to finish her dinner. That big baby was lost in ecstasy over the nestlings, asking questions, wanting to know what food they ate, if they laid eggs, and how the cockbirds could be known.

The old servant, however, was troubled by a suspicion, and taking her stand on her sound leg, she looked the young cure in the face.

'So you know the Paradou people?' she said.

Thereupon he simply told the truth, relating the visit he had paid to old Jeanbernat. La Teuse exchanged scandalised glances with Brother Archangias. At first she answered nothing, but went round and round the table, limping frantically and stamping hard enough with her heels to split the flooring.

'You might have spoken to me of those people these three months past,' said the priest at last. 'I should have known at any rate what sort of people I was going to call upon.'

La Teuse stopped short as if her legs had just broken.

'Don't tell falsehoods, Monsieur le Cure,' she stuttered, 'don't tell them; you will only make your sin still worse. How dare you say I haven't spoken to you of the Philosopher, that heathen who is the scandal of the whole neighbourhood? The truth is, you never listen to me when I talk. It all goes in at one ear and out at the other. Ah, if you did listen to me, you'd spare yourself a good deal of trouble!'

'I, too, have spoken to you about those abominations,' affirmed the Brother.

Abbe Mouret lightly shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, I didn't remember it,' he said. It was only when I found myself at the Paradou that I fancied I recollected certain tales. Besides, I should have gone to that unhappy man all the same as I thought him in danger of death.'

Brother Archangias, his mouth full, struck the table violently with his knife, and roared: 'Jeanbernat is a dog; he ought to die like a dog.' Then seeing the priest about to protest he cut him short: 'No, no, for him there is no God, no penitence, no mercy. It would be better to throw the host to the pigs than carry it to that scoundrel.'

Then he helped himself to more potatoes, and with his elbows on the table, his chin in his plate, began chewing furiously. La Teuse, her lips pinched, quite white with anger, contented herself with saying dryly: 'Let it be, his reverence will have his own way. He has secrets from us now.'

Silence reigned. For a moment one only heard the working of Brother Archangias's jaws, and the extraordinary rumbling of his gullet. Desiree, with her bare arms round the nest in her plate, smiled to the little ones, talking to them slowly and softly in a chirruping of her own which they seemed to understand.

'People say what they have done when they have nothing to hide,' suddenly cried La Teuse.

And then silence reigned again. What exasperated the old servant was the mystery the priest seemed to make about his visit to the Paradou. She deemed herself a woman who had been shamefully deceived. Her curiosity smarted. She again walked round the table, not looking at the Abbe, not addressing anybody, but comforting herself with soliloquy.

'That's it; that's why we have lunch so late! We go gadding about till two o'clock in the afternoon. We go into such disreputable houses that we don't even dare to tell what we've done. And then we tell lies, we deceive everybody.'

'But nobody,' gently interrupted Abbe Mouret, who was forcing himself to eat a little more, so as to prevent La Teuse from getting crosser than ever, 'nobody asked me if I had been to the Paradou. I have not had to tell any lies.'

La Teuse, however, went on as if she had never heard him.

'Yes, we go ruining our cassock in the dust, we come home rigged up like a thief. And if some kind person takes an interest in us, and questions us for our own good, we push her about and treat her like a good-for-nothing woman, whom we can't trust. We hide things like a slyboots, we'd rather die than breathe a word; we're not even considerate enough to enliven our home by relating what we've seen.'

She turned to the priest, and looked him full in the face.

'Yes, you take that to yourself. You are a close one, you're a bad man!'

Thereupon she fell to crying and the Abbe had to soothe her.

'Monsieur Caffin used to tell me everything,' she moaned out.

However, she soon grew calmer. Brother Archangias was finishing a big piece of cheese, apparently quite unruffled by the scene. In his opinion Abbe Mouret really needed being kept straight, and La Teuse was right in making him feel the reins. Having drunk a last glassful of the weak wine, the Brother threw himself back in his chair to digest his meal.

'Well now,' finally asked the old servant, 'what did you see at the Paradou? Tell us, at any rate.'

Abbe Mouret smiled and related in a few words how strangely Jeanbernat had received him. La Teuse, after overwhelming him with questions, broke out into indignant exclamations, while Brother Archangias clenched his fists and brandished them aloft.

'May Heaven crush him!' said he, 'and burn both him and his witch!'

In his turn the Abbe then endeavoured to elicit some fresh particulars about the people at the Paradou, and listened intently to the Brother's monstrous narrative.

'Yes, that little she-devil came and sat down in the school. It's a long time ago now, she might then have been about ten. Of course, I let her come; I thought her uncle was sending her to prepare for her first communion. But for two months she utterly revolutionised the whole class. She made herself worshipped, the minx! She knew all sorts of games, and invented all sorts of finery with leaves and shreds of rags. And how quick and clever she was, too, like all those children of hell! She was the top one at catechism. But one fine morning the old man burst in just in the middle of our lessons. He was going to smash everything, and shouted that the priests had taken his child from him. We had to get the rural policeman to turn him out. As to the little one, she bolted. I could see her through the window, in a field opposite, laughing at her uncle's frenzy. She had been coming to school for the last two months without his even suspecting it. He had regularly scoured the country after her.'

'She's never taken her first communion,' exclaimed La Teuse below her breath with a slight shudder.

'No, never,' rejoined Brother Archangias. 'She must be sixteen now. She's growing up like a brute beast. I have seen her running on all fours in a thicket near La Palud.'

'On all fours,' muttered the servant, turning towards the window with superstitious anxiety.

Abbe Mouret attempted to express some doubt, but the Brother burst out: 'Yes, on all fours! And she jumped like a wild cat. If I had only had a gun I could have put a bullet in her. We kill creatures that are far more pleasing to God than she is. Besides, every one knows she comes caterwauling every night round Les Artaud. She howls like a beast. If ever a man should fall into her clutches, she wouldn't leave him a scrap of skin on his bones, I know.'

The Brother's hatred of womankind was boiling over. He banged the table with his fist, and poured forth all his wonted abuse.

'The devil's in them. They reek of the devil! And that's what bewitches fools.'

The priest nodded approvingly. Brother Archangias's outrageous violence and La Teuse's loquacious tyranny were like castigation with thongs, which it often rejoiced him to find lashing his shoulders. He took a pious delight in sinking into abasement beneath their coarse speech. He seemed to see the peace of heaven behind contempt of the world and degradation of his whole being. It was delicious to inflict mortification upon his body, to drag his susceptible nature through a gutter.

'There is nought but filth,' he muttered as he folded up his napkin.

La Teuse began to clear the table and wished to remove the plate on which Desiree had laid the blackbird's nest. You are not going to bed here, I suppose, mademoiselle,' she said. 'Do leave those nasty things.'

Desiree, however, defended her plate. She covered the nest with her bare arms, no longer gay, but cross at being disturbed.

'I hope those birds are not going to be kept,' exclaimed Brother Archangias. 'It would bring bad luck. You must wring their necks.'

And he already stretched out his big hands; but the girl rose and stepped back quivering, hugging the nest to her bosom. She stared fixedly at the Brother, her lips curling upwards, like those of a wolf about to bite.

'Don't touch the little things,' she stammered. 'You are ugly.'

With such singular contempt did she emphasise that last word that Abbe Mouret started as if the Brother's ugliness had just struck him for the first time. The latter contented himself with growling. He had always felt a covert hatred for Desiree, whose lusty physical development offended

him. When she had left the room, still walking backwards, and never taking her eyes from him, he shrugged his shoulders and muttered between his teeth some coarse abuse which no one heard.

'She had better go to bed,' said La Teuse. 'She would only bore us by-and-by in church.'

'Has any one come yet?' asked Abbe Mouret.

'Oh, the girls have been outside a long time with armfuls of boughs. I am just going to light the lamps. We can begin whenever you like.'

A few seconds later she could be heard swearing in the sacristy because the matches were damp. Brother Archangias, who remained alone with the priest, sourly inquired: 'For the month of Mary, eh?'

'Yes,' replied Abbe Mouret. 'The last few days the girls about here were hard at work and couldn't come as usual to decorate the Lady Chapel. So the ceremony was postponed till to-night.'

'A nice custom,' muttered the Brother. 'When I see them all putting up their boughs I feel inclined to knock them down and make them confess their misdeeds before touching the altar. It's a shame to allow women to rustle their dresses so near the holy relics.'

The Abbe made an apologetic gesture. He had only been at Les Artaud a little while, he must follow the customs.

'Whenever you like, Monsieur le Cure, we're ready!' now called out La Teuse.

But Brother Archangias detained him a minute. 'I am off,' he said. 'Religion isn't a prostitute that it should be decorated with flowers and laces.'

He walked slowly to the door. Then once more he stopped, and lifting one of his hairy fingers added: 'Beware of your devotion to the Virgin.'

XIII

On entering the church Abbe Mouret found nine or ten big girls awaiting him with boughs of ivy, laurel, and rosemary. Few garden flowers grew on the rocks of Les Artaud, so the custom was to decorate the Lady altar with a greenery which might last throughout the month of May. Thereto La Teuse would add a few wallflowers whose stems were thrust into old decanters.

'Will you let me do it, Monsieur le Cure?' she asked. 'You are not used to it – Come, stand there in front of the altar. You can tell me if the decorations please you.'

He consented, and it was she who really directed the arrangements. Having climbed upon a pair of steps she bullied the girls as they came up to her in turn with their leafy contributions.

'Not so fast, now! You must give me time to fix the boughs. We can't have all these bundles coming down on his reverence's head – Come on, Babet, it's your turn. What's the good of staring at me like that with your big eyes? Fine rosemary yours is, my word! as yellow as a thistle. You next, La Rousse. Ah, well, that is splendid laurel! You got that out of your field at Croix-Verte, I know.'

The big girls laid their branches on the altar, which they kissed; and there they lingered for a while, handing up the greenery to La Teuse. The sly look of devotion they had assumed on stepping on to the altar steps was quickly set aside, and soon they were laughing, digging each other with their knees, swaying their hips against the altar's edge, and thrusting their bosoms against the tabernacle itself. Over them the tall Virgin in gilded plaster bent her tinted face, and smiled with her rosy lips upon the naked Jesus she bore upon her left arm.

'That's it, Lisa!' cried La Teuse; 'why don't you sit on the altar while you're about it? Just pull your petticoats straight, will you? Aren't you ashamed of behaving like that? – If any one of you lolls about I'll lay her boughs across her face. – Can't you hand me the things quietly?'

Then turning round, she asked:

'Do you like it, sir? Do you think it will do?'

She had converted the space behind the Virgin's statue into a verdant niche, whence leafy sprays projected on either side, forming a bower, and drooping over in front like palm leaves. The priest expressed his approval, but ventured to remark: 'I think there ought to be a cluster of more delicate foliage up above.'

'No doubt,' grumbled La Teuse. 'But they only bring me laurel and rosemary – I should like to know who has brought an olive branch. Not one, you bet! They are afraid of losing a single olive, the heathens!'

At this, however, Catherine came up laden with an enormous olive bough which completely hid her.

'Oh, you've got some, you minx!' continued the old servant.

'Of course,' one of the other girls exclaimed, 'she stole it. I saw Vincent breaking it off while she kept a look-out.'

But Catherine flew into a rage and swore it was not true. She turned, and thrusting her auburn head through the greenery, which she still tightly held, she started lying with marvellous assurance, inventing quite a long story to prove that the olive bough was really hers.

'Besides,' she added, 'all the trees belong to the Blessed Virgin.'

Abbe Mouret was about to intervene, but La Teuse sharply inquired if they wanted to make game of her and keep her arms up there all night. At last she proceeded to fasten the olive bough firmly, while Catherine, holding on to the steps behind her, mimicked the clumsy manner in which she turned her huge person about with the help of her sound leg. Even the priest could not forbear to smile.

'There,' said La Teuse, as she came down and stood beside him to get a good view of her work, 'there's the top done. Now we will put some clumps between the candlesticks, unless you would prefer a garland all along the altar shelf.'

The priest decided in favour of some big clumps.

'Very good; come on, then,' continued the old servant, once more clambering up the steps. 'We can't go to bed here. Just kiss the altar, will you, Miette? Do you fancy you are in your stable? Monsieur le Cure, do just see what they are up to over there! I can hear them laughing like lunatics.'

On raising one of the two lamps the dark end of the church was lit up and three of the girls were discovered romping about under the gallery; one of them had stumbled and pitched head foremost into the holy water stoup, which mishap had so tickled the others that they were rolling on the ground to laugh at their ease. They all came back, however, looking at the priest sheepishly, with lowered eyelids, but with their hands swinging against their hips as if a scolding rather pleased them than otherwise.

However, the measure of La Teuse's wrath was filled when she suddenly perceived Rosalie coming up to the altar like the others with a bundle of boughs in her arms.

'Get down, will you?' she cried to her. 'You are a cool one, and no mistake, my lass! – Hurry up, off you go with your bundle.'

'What for, I'd like to know?' said Rosalie boldly. 'You can't say I have stolen it.'

The other girls drew closer, feigning innocence and exchanging sparkling glances.

'Clear out,' repeated La Teuse, 'you have no business here, do you hear?'

Then, quite losing her scanty patience, she gave vent to a very coarse epithet, which provoked a titter of delight among the peasant girls.

'Well, what next?' said Rosalie. 'Mind your own business. Is it any concern of yours?'

Then she burst into a fit of sobbing and threw down her boughs, but let the Abbe lead her aside and give her a severe lecture. He had already tried to silence La Teuse; for he was beginning to feel uneasy amidst the big shameless hussies who filled the church with their armfuls of foliage. They were pushing right up to the altar step, enclosing him with a belt of woodland, wafting in his face a rank perfume of aromatic shoots.

'Let us make haste, be quick!' he exclaimed, clapping his hands lightly.

'Goodness knows I would rather be in my bed,' grumbled La Teuse. 'It's not so easy as you think to fasten all these bits of stuff.'

Finally, however, she succeeded in setting some lofty plumes of foliage between the candlesticks. Next she folded the steps, which were laid behind the high altar by Catherine. And then she only had to arrange two clumps of greenery at the sides of the altar table. The last boughs sufficed for this, and indeed there were some left which the girls strewed over the sanctuary floor up to the wooden rails. The Lady altar now looked like a grove, a shrubbery with a verdant lawn before it.

At present La Teuse was willing to make way for Abbe Mouret, who ascended the altar steps, and, again lightly clapping his hands, exclaimed: 'Young ladies, to-morrow we will continue the devotions of the month of Mary. Those who may be unable to come ought at least to say their Rosary at home.'

He knelt, and the peasant girls, with a mighty rustle of skirts, sank down and settled themselves on their heels. They followed his prayer with a confused muttering, through which burst here and there a giggle. One of them, on being pinched from behind, burst into a scream, which she attempted to stifle with a sudden fit of coughing; and this so diverted the others that for a moment after the Amen they remained writhing with merriment, their noses close to the stone flags.

La Teuse dismissed them; while the priest, after crossing himself, remained absorbed before the altar, no longer hearing what went on behind him.

'Come, now, clear out,' muttered the old woman. 'You're a pack of good-for-nothings, who can't even respect God. It's shameful, it's unheard of, for girls to roll about on the floor in church like

beasts in a meadow – What are you doing there, La Rousse? If I see you pinching any one, you'll have to deal with me! Oh, yes, you may put out your tongue at me; I'll tell his reverence about it. Out you get; out you get, you minxes!'

She drove them slowly towards the door, while running and bobbling round them frantically. And she had succeeded, as she thought, in getting every one of them outside, when she caught sight of Catherine and Vincent calmly installed in the confessional, where they were eating something with an air of great enjoyment. She drove them away; and as she popped her head outside the church, before closing the door, she espied Rosalie throwing her arm over the shoulder of Fortune, who had been waiting for her. The pair of them vanished in the darkness amid a faint sound of kisses.

'To think that such creatures dare to come to our Lady's altar!' La Teuse stuttered as she shot the bolts. 'The others are no better, I am sure. If they came to-night with their boughs, it was only for a bit of fun and to get kissed by the lads on going off! Not one of them will put herself out of the way to-morrow; his reverence will have to say his *Aves* by himself – We shall only see the jades who have got assignations.'

Thus soliloquising, she thrust the chairs back into their places, and looked round to see if anything suspicious was lying about before going off to bed. In the confessional she picked up a handful of apple-parings, which she threw behind the high altar. And she also found a bit of ribbon torn from some cap, and a lock of black hair, which she made up into a small parcel, with the view of opening an inquiry into the matter. With these exceptions the church seemed to her tidy. There was oil enough for the night in the bracket-lamp of the sanctuary, and as to the flags of the choir, they could do without washing till Saturday.

'It's nearly ten o'clock, Monsieur le Cure,' she said, drawing near the priest, who was still on his knees. 'You might as well come up now.'

He made no answer, but only bowed his head.

'All right, I know what that means,' continued La Teuse. 'In another hour he will still be on the stones there, giving himself a stomach-ache. I'm off, as I shall only bore him. All the same, I can't see much sense in it, eating one's lunch when others are at dinner, and going to bed when the fowls get up! – I worry you, don't I, your reverence? Good-night. You're not at all reasonable!'

She made ready to go, but suddenly came back to put out one of the two lamps, muttering the while that such late prayers spelt ruination in oil. Then, at last, she did go off, after passing her sleeve brushwise over the cloth of the high altar, which seemed to her grey with dust. Abbe Mouret, his eyes uplifted, his arms tightly clasped against his breast, then remained alone.

XIV

With only one lamp burning amid the verdure on the altar of the Virgin, huge floating shadows filled the church at either end. From the pulpit a sheet of gloom projected to the rafters of the ceiling. The confessional looked quite black under the gallery, showing strange outlines suggestive of a ruined sentry-box. All the light, softened and tinted as it were by the green foliage, rested slumberingly upon the tall gilded Virgin, who seemed to descend with queenly mien, borne upon the cloud round which gambolled the winged cherubim. At sight of that round lamp gleaming amid the boughs one might have thought the pallid moon was rising on the verge of a wood, casting its light upon a regal apparition, a princess of heaven, crowned and clothed with gold, who with her nude and Divine Infant had come to stroll in the mysterious woodland avenues. Between the leaves, along the lofty plumes of greenery, within the large ogival arbour, and even along the branches strewing the flagstones, star-like beams glided drowsily, like the milky rain of light that filters through the bushes on moonlit nights. Vague sounds and creakings came from the dusky ends of the church; the large clock on the left of the chancel throbbed slowly, with the heavy breathing of a machine asleep. And the radiant vision, the Mother with slender bands of chestnut hair, as if reassured by the nocturnal quiet of the nave, came lower and lower, scarce bending the blades of grass in the clearings beneath the gentle flight of her cloudy chariot.

Abbe Mouret gazed at her. This was the hour when he most loved the church. He forgot the woeful figure on the cross, the Victim bedaubed with carmine and ochre, who gasped out His life behind him, in the chapel of the Dead. His thoughts were no longer distracted by the garish light from the windows, by the gayness of morning coming in with the sun, by the irruption of outdoor life – the sparrows and the boughs invading the nave through the shattered panes. At that hour of night Nature was dead; shadows hung the whitewashed walls with crape; a chill fell upon his shoulders like a salutary penance-shirt. He could now wholly surrender himself to the supremest love, without fear of any flickering ray of light, any caressing breeze or scent, any buzzing of an insect's wing disturbing him amidst the delight of loving. Never had his morning mass afforded him the superhuman joys of his nightly prayers.

With quivering lips Abbe Mouret now gazed at the tall Virgin. He could see her coming towards him from the depths of her green bower in ever-increasing splendour. No longer did a flood of moonlight seem to float across the tree-tops. She seemed to him clothed with the sun; she advanced majestically, glorious, colossal, and so all-powerful that he was tempted at times to cast himself face downwards to shun the flaming splendour of that gate opening into heaven. Then, amidst the adoration of his whole being, which stayed his words upon his lips, he remembered Brother Archangias's final rebuke, as he might have remembered words of blasphemy. The Brother often reproved him for his devotion to the Virgin, which he declared was veritable robbery of devotion due to God. In the Brother's opinion it enervated the soul, put religion into petticoats, created and fostered a state of sentimentalism quite unworthy of the strong. He bore the Virgin a grudge for her womanhood, her beauty, her maternity; he was ever on his guard against her, possessed by a covert fear of feeling tempted by her gracious mien, of succumbing to her seductive sweetness. 'She will lead you far!' he had cried one day to the young priest, for in her he saw the commencement of human passion. From contemplating her one might glide to delight in lovely chestnut hair, in large bright eyes, and the mystery of garments falling from neck to toes. His was the blunt rebellion of a saint who roughly parted the Mother from the Son, asking as He did: 'Woman, what have we in common, thou and I?'

But Abbe Mouret thrust away such thoughts, prostrated himself, endeavoured to forget the Brother's harsh attacks. His rapture in the immaculate purity of Mary alone raised him from the depths of lowliness in which he sought to bury himself. Whenever, alone before the tall golden Virgin,

he so deceived himself as to imagine that he could see her bending down for him to kiss her braided locks, he once more became very young, very good, very strong, very just, full of tenderness.

Abbe Mouret's devotion to the Virgin dated from his early youth. Already when he was quite a child, somewhat shy and fond of shrinking into corners, he took pleasure in the thought that a lovely lady was watching over him: that two blue eyes, so sweet, ever followed him with their smile. When he felt at night a breath of air glide across his hair, he would often say that the Virgin had come to kiss him. He had grown up beneath this womanly caress, in an atmosphere full of the rustle of divine robes. From the age of seven he had satisfied the cravings of his affection by expending all the pence he received as pocket money in the purchase of pious picture-cards, which he jealously concealed that he alone might feast on them. But never was he tempted by the pictures of Jesus and the Lamb, of Christ on the Cross, of God the Father, with a mighty beard, stooping over a bank of clouds; his preference was always for the winning portraits of Mary, with her tiny smiling mouth and delicate outstretched hands. By degrees he had made quite a collection of them all – of Mary between a lily and a distaff, Mary carrying her child as if she were his elder sister, Mary crowned with roses, and Mary crowned with stars. For him they formed a family of lovely young maidens, alike in their attractiveness, in the grace, kindliness, and sweetness of their countenances, so youthful beneath their veils, that although they bore the name of 'Mother of God,' he had felt no awe of them as he had often felt for grown-up persons.

They seemed to him of his own age, little girls such as he wished to meet with, little girls of heaven such as the little boys who die when seven years old have for eternal playmates in some nook of Paradise. But even at this early age he was self-contained; and full of the exquisite bashfulness of adolescence he grew up without betraying the secret of his religious love. Mary grew up with him, being invariably a year or two older than himself, as should always be the case with one's chiefest friend. When he was eighteen, she was twenty; she no longer kissed his forehead at night time, but stood a little further from him with folded arms, chastely smiling, ravishingly sweet. And he – he only named her now in a whisper, feeling as if he would faint each time the well-loved name passed his lips in prayer. No more did he dream of childish games within the garden of heaven, but of continual contemplation before that white figure, whose perfect purity he feared to sully with his breath. Even from his own mother did he conceal the fervour of his love for Mary.

Then, a few years later, at the seminary, his beautiful affection for her, seemingly so just, so natural, was disturbed by inward qualms. Was the cult of Mary necessary for salvation? Was he not robbing God by giving Mary a part, the greater part, of his love, his thoughts, his heart, his entire being? Perplexing questions were these, provoking an inward struggle which increased his passion, riveted his bonds. For he dived into all the subtleties of his affection, found unknown joys in discussing the lawfulness of his feelings. The books treating of devotion to the Virgin brought him excuses, joyful raptures, a wealth of arguments which he repeated with prayerful fervour. From them he learned how, in Mary, to be the slave of Jesus. He went to Jesus through Mary. He cited all kinds of proofs, he discriminated, he drew inferences. Mary, whom Jesus had obeyed on earth, should be obeyed by all mankind; Mary still retained her maternal power in heaven, where she was the great dispenser of God's treasures, the only one who could beseech Him, the only one who allotted the heavenly thrones; and thus Mary, a mere creature before God, but raised up to Him, became the human link between heaven and earth, the intermediary of every grace, of every mercy; and his conclusion always was that she should be loved above all else in God himself. Another time he was attracted by more complicated theological curiosities: the marriage of the celestial spouse, the Holy Ghost sealing the Vase of Election, making of the Virgin Mary an everlasting miracle, offering her inviolable purity to the devotion of mankind. She was the Virgin overcoming all heresies, the irreconcilable foe of Satan, the new Eve of whom it had been foretold that she should crush the Serpent's head, the august Gate of Grace, by which the Saviour had already entered once and through which He would come again

at the Last Day – a vague prophecy, allotting a yet larger future role to Mary, which threw Serge into a dreamy imagining of some immense expansion of divine love.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.